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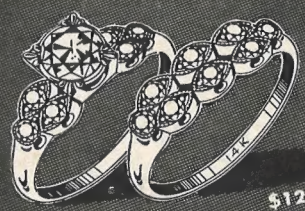

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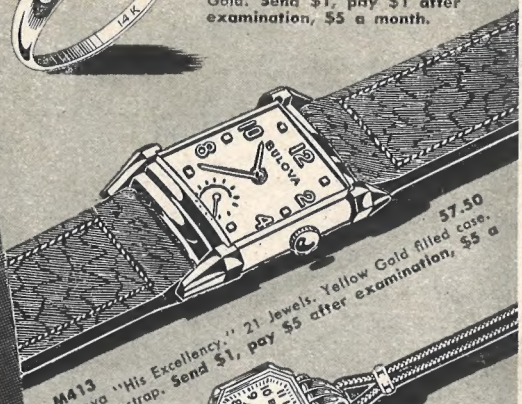

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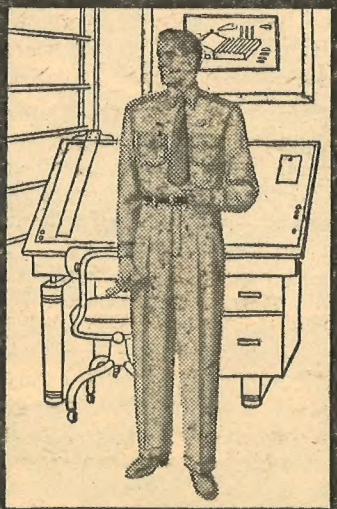

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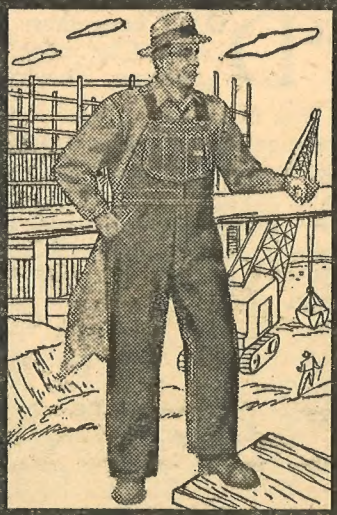

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EVEN A GUNMAN NEEDS A MOTHER

By

JAMES HARRISON

"DON'T hang these poor boys!" sixty-year-old Molly Powers pleaded before a Silver City judge. "It ain't their fault they went wrong. They never had no guidance. They're all orphans!"

The magistrate stared in amazement at the dignified, sweet-faced little woman who had appeared so suddenly at his bench just as he was getting ready to order a hanging. Then he glanced at the four hardened bank robbers lined up in irons across the room. There were Hank Browne, 40, who had already served three terms in jail; George McGrath, 30, who once rode for bandit Sam Bass; Peter Wilcox or Wilson, killer of three men; Jim Kelly, only 18, but already an experienced gunfighter.

"You see, Judge," Molly was still talking, "me and my husband Sam bin married nearly fifty years and we never had any child of our own, although we've prayed plenty. Now, t'aint fair that some should want children and have none, and children should need parents and have none either. All these boys need is a good home."

"In short," Sam Powers took up the plea, "we want to adopt these boys, yer Honor permittin', and we guarantee we'll make good citizens out of them."

His Honor stroked his chin thoughtfully. Of course, he reflected, the four rogues were not really offenders in the state of New Mexico. They were wanted in Pima County, Arizona, and it was only to save time and trouble that he was hanging them here. He never had cared for that Pima sheriff anyway. Why, the fellow was a damn Yankee!

He interrupted his own thoughts with a rap of the gavel. "Request granted!" he snapped. He turned to the horrified court clerk. "Make out adoption papers."

George, Hank, Pete and Jim, the orphans in question, would naturally prefer anything to the hempen noose that they had anticipated. Meekly, they followed the Powers couple to their nearby ranch. They ate Molly's homemade soup and her famous fresh bread and even dug postholes and shoed horsese for Sam. The old couple, probably a little senile, were deliriously happy.

"At last we've got children!" they told each other.

Meanwhile, the "children," upstairs in their hayloft bedroom, laid elaborate plans to rob the Silver City bank.

"We'll crack it like an egg!" Jim boasted. But he had forgotten to lower his voice. When he looked up, Molly Powers was weeping on the doorstep and Sam was behind her, stern-faced. The bandits tensed as they saw that he carried something black and half-hidden in his hand, then relaxed when they realized that it was a Bible, not a gun. Sam read to them that night from the Good Book for hours, his old voice quavering. But at the end, when they found the bandits could not be dissuaded, they insisted on going with them.

"If you won't live our way of life," Molly told them, "we'll live yours."

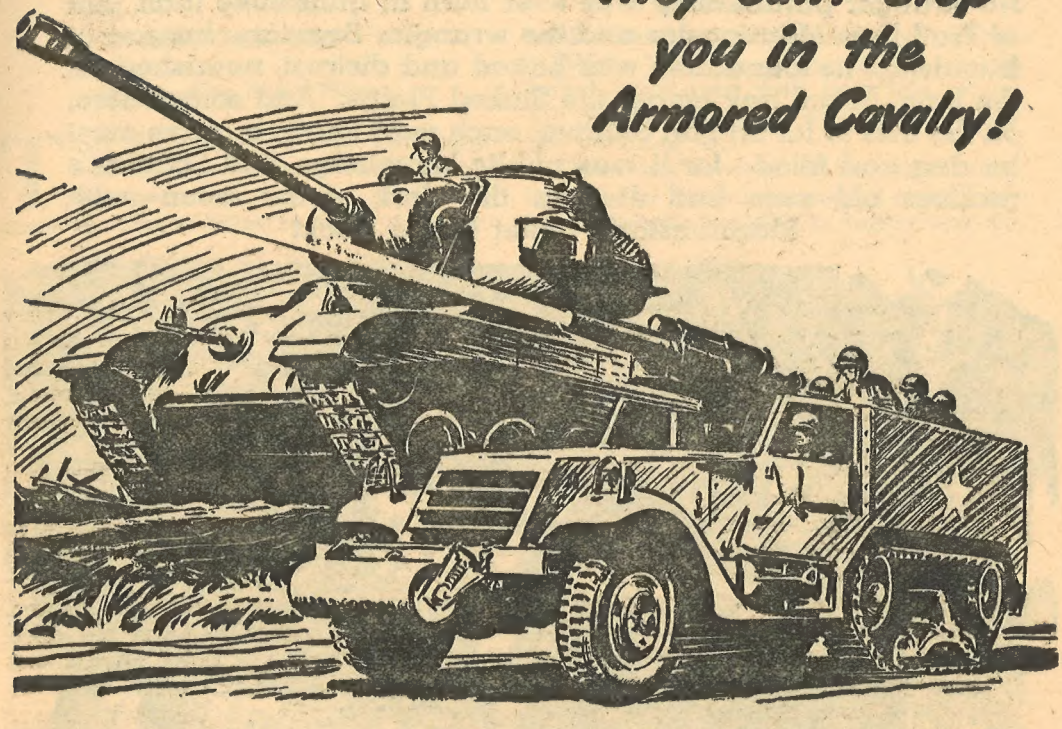
The old couple called the bandits' bluff. They started out at daybreak the next morning, Molly and Sam in the wagon, their "sons" on horseback. Under Molly's skirts were hidden three rifles.

They stopped the wagon a half-mile from town and spread out to enter as unobtrusively as possible from four different directions. What went on thereafter in Jim's mind, at least, was later recorded in his journal, for Jim became an educated man.

He began to feel pangs of guilt as soon as he got in sight of the bank. He thought

(Please turn to page 95)

they can't stop you in the Armored Cavalry!



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HELL BEGINS AT

Powerful Outlaw Novel

No stranger pardnership was ever born in gunsmoke than that of Trail Boss Morningstar and the wrangler Scanlan. Instead of friendship, its foundation was hatred and distrust, nourished on the long, brutal trek across the Staked Plains. And somewhere, on the trail to far-off Fort Sumner, each man knew, a grave must be dug and filled—for it was public knowledge that Scanlan's reckless old man had died in the dark of the moon—with Morningstar's bullet in his back!

HORSEHEAD CROSSING!

By WALT COBURN

CHAPTER ONE

Plague of the Staked Plains

THE Fence Cutter's War was under way in Texas when Bob Morningstar pointed a big pool trail herd across the Staked Plains to water at Horsehead Crossing on the winding Pecos.

"Well, Till," the lanky, six-foot, black-haired, black-eyed trail boss told young Till Scanlan, the horse wrangler, "it looks like we made 'er."

There was no frontier historian handy to set down that masterpiece of understatement. Nobody heard it but twenty-year-old

"Dig, you tow-headed son! Dig 'er wide enough for two!"

Scanlan and he was too damned sick to pay much attention.

There had been no water since day before yesterday. When Scanlan had thrown his remuda in on water and feed with the cattle, he'd slid from his saddle, lain flat on his belly on the river bank and drunk all the water he could hold. Now he had belly-ache cramps and thought mebby he was going to die. Something churned around inside him, his mouth gaped and all the water he'd gulped came retching out.

"Now it looks like a feller'd have better sense," Morningstar said, "than to tackle a job like that, single-handed. But I reckon you ain't the first man crossed the Staked Plains to try to drink the Pecos plumb dry."

Morningstar told Scanlan to lay in the shade of his horse and take 'er easy for a while. Then when he got around to it again, to drink slow and not too much.

"You're all the crew I got left." Morningstar grinned flatly. "You croak on me I'll be short-handed."

Morningstar rode down along the river to ease the drags onto feed. He was tough as a boot, this long-geared Texan with the coarse black hair and black eyes of an Injun. He was black-whiskered now, his leathery hide dust-powdered. Morningstar and Scanlan were the only two men left alive in the outfit.

There had been too many men to begin with. Men who had ridden up out of nowhere with little drives of longhorns to throw into the herd starting across the arid Staked Plains. These jaspers were mostly strangers to one another. No doubt, a lot were rustlers. All had but one idea: To get out of Texas while still alive. The jangling and quarreling had started before the herd left San Angelo. From there on across the Staked Plains they hed kept it up. Killing one another. Some turned tail and headed back because the outfit was too tough to stay with.

The trail across the Staked Plains was left strewn with unburied dead and the carcasses of longhorns grown too weak to continue. There had been no time to trim the herd before it started. And even if Bob Morningstar had tried to cut back any of those cattle that weren't in shape to cross the waterless Plains it would have meant a ruckus with the men who claimed ownership of the critters. Those gents were tough.

The outfit was in sight of the Pecos when the five men left alive had tangled in a gun fight that had wiped them out.

Bob Morningstar had told Scanlan to throw his remuda in with the cattle and help him with the drags. The leaders had smelled water and headed for the Pecos at a walk-bawl. Morningstar had ridden up in the lead to fan the cattle out the best he could to prevent a disastrous pile-up along the river bank. He had done a good cowman's job of it, with a lot of good luck on his side.

Young Till had stayed back in the dust with the drags. He'd made a hand. He'd made a hand since he'd thrown in with the herd at San Angelo, where their wrangler had gotten killed in a gun fight. He'd taken Morningstar's advice and stayed clear of the jangling and fighting that dogged the outfit.

"They're a wolf pack, sabe?" The trail boss had told Scanlan. "When you hear or see anything looks like the commencing of trouble, get away from it. Ride off or hide out till it's over. Let wolf eat wolf."

Morningstar took his own advice. Not once had he so much as reached for the saddle carbine he packed or the ivory handled six-shooter in its tied-down holster on his flank. When trouble started he rode away from it.

Like as not he would take young Till with him. And nobody but the tow-headed, blue-eyed young wrangler ever saw that hard grin on the boss' leathery face—or the strange glint in his eyes.

If young Till Scanlan guessed or suspected that Morningstar had cunningly rigged some of those gun fights, he never let on. He was wise beyond his twenty years. Wise as an old cowhand about a lot of things. And close mouthed.

"What's your name?" Morningstar had asked Till at San Angelo where the kid had tackled him for the wrangler job. "Where do you come from?"

"You kin call me the Kid. And I don't reckon it makes much difference about my pedigree or home range if I git the job done. I'll save you a nighthawk's wages, to boot, if you turn over your remuda to me."

"When do you aim to sleep?"

"If I spill so much as one horse or mule,

fire me. I'll manage for sleep in the saddle."

Till didn't act fresh about it. His eyes never flinched under the scrutiny of the trail boss.

IT WASN'T till the herd was half way across the Staked Plains and more than half the outfit killed off or turned back, that he told Morningstar what his name was or where he came from. He wouldn't have said anything then only the boss advised him to saddle a good horse and high-tail it back to the safety of San Angelo, away from this gun-slinging outfit.

"I ain't goin' back, mister," Scanlan said slowly. "The Rangers killed my old man because he had it comin' to him. He was mixed up on the wrong side in the Fence Cutters' War. Jake Scanlan was a hard-case. Mebbyso there's Rangers will kill me off on account of I'm his son. He had me help him steal cattle. I'm quittin' Texas. I'm never goin' back. I'd ruther die, mister, out here on the Plains."

"Nobody's crowdin' you into goin' back. I'll see to it you don't get killed off. So you're Jake Scanlan's son!"

"You knowed my old man?"

"I knew him. Yeah."

Morningstar's black eyes had probed deep into young Scanlan for a long moment. The boy had stood the scrutiny without flinching.

Probably no twenty-year-old kid had ever gone through the dangerous ordeal young Till had just survived. The thirst, hunger and dust, and days and nights without sleep. Watching men kill one another. Some of those killings were no more than cold-blooded murder. Each time the herd moved on after a few hours rest in the middle of the day, dead men were left behind.

Now it was all over and Scanlan had survived. Now, after he'd puked up the river water, and the nausea was gone, the thirst returned. He sipped the water slowly until he figured he had enough. He was still thirsty and dizzy when he mounted and rode down the river to help Morningstar with the cattle.

Morningstar had fetched along a sack of jerky. He handed Till some of the dried meat to chew on. He said, "Tomorrow we'll lead back the mules to where we left the wagons and we'll move camp here. Somehow I'll manage for enough cowhands to move this herd on up the Pecos. You just bin through more in the past four days an' nights than most old gray-haired men bin through in a life-time. It's aged you some. Like as not you git the dust washed off you'll find yourself white-headed. Though tow-headed that-away, it's hard to tell, I reckon, if your hair turned snow white. You got a tally on your remuda?"

"Yes, sir. One hundred an' thirty eight head of horses an' sixteen mules. You want the tally in each brand? And them with the brands blotched?"

Morningstar shook his head. "Got any kind of a rough tally on the cattle, Till?"

"Two thousand, seven hundred. That'll be within a hundred head of it, near as I kin figger."

"That'll do. Brands?"

"I know every iron in the herd," Scanlan told him. "And them brands that's bin worked. I got a rough tally of what's in each iron put down in my tally book. It kinda kep' me awake an' taken my mind off being' thirsty."

"Don't lose that book," the boss said. "Like as not when we git to Fort Sumner the law there will hold us up for a Winchester cut on these cattle. The bulk of this herd is stolen. Them fellers that we out-lived comin' was all rustlers. I don't know much about the law west of the Pecos but it's a cinch we'll be held up at Sumner. When we're asked questions, all you got to do is to tell the truth. Tell what happened just like you watched it. I don't want you to ever tell any man on earth a lie."

Morningstar pointed back across the Staked Plains. "That's behind us, sabe? For keeps. God only knows what's ahead of us for a trail. I don't even know for certain where I'm takin' this herd. I don't know if I'll sell it at Sumner or trail on yonderly from there. One thing only I know for sure. Nobody is takin' this outfit away from me—not even the law. Only way I kin lose it is if they kill me. I ain't easy to kill. This is my outfit now. . . ."

Bob Morningstar spoke in a soft, slurred drawl. But his right hand was on the six-shooter Scanlan had never seen drawn from its holster. "I played for high stakes when I pointed that stolen herd acrost the Plains." he said. "So far, I'm lucky. But there's no tellin' how far I kin ride that

luck. I ain't tellin' you no more, sabe, because what you don't know you can't talk about in your sleep. Out of all that renegade outfit, you was the only human worth savin'. I can't promise you a thing if you stay with me. When we reach Fort Sumner you kin name your wages and I'll pay you off there. Or if you want to come along, I'd be proud to have you."

"Wherever you go," Scanlan said, "I'd be proud to go along if you'll take me. I'll do my best to make a hand."

"That's a deal, pardner."

They caught fresh saddle horses and staked them out. When they had eaten their fill of dry jerky and washed it down with river water they lay on the ground and slept the drugged sleep of exhaustion.

There was no more than that to the pact that was to forever bind Morningstar and Scanlan. It was a strange sort of pardnership because there was no friendship to weld it—only wariness and distrust. It was like a two-handed poker game, each man with his hole card buried. Each with the same ace in the hole—Jake Scanlan.

TILL SCANLAN had heard it one night in San Angelo at the feed yard where a bunch of cowpunchers were saddling and fixing to pull out. It had been too dark to recognize any of them and he heard no familiar voices.

"It was Bob Morningstar," said one of the cowhands as they rode away from the feed yard into the night, "who killed Jake Scanlan."

Till had heard no more. But he was convinced the man spoke the truth.

So when Morningstar showed up at San Angelo with the herd and a tough crew of cowhands, Till had waited until the sign was right and then tackled Morningstar for the job. Till had seen the pool trail herd horse wrangler get killed in a saloon ruckus and Till had tackled Morningstar for the job and gotten it.

He wondered at the time if Morningstar knew he was the only son of the dead Jake, who had been killed one night during the Wire Cutters' war—a war still going on. It was only when the outfit was in the middle of the Staked Plains that Till told Morningstar who he was. But even then he covered up the fact that he knew Morningstar killed his father. Jake had been ramrodding one of the gangs that had cut the pasture and drift fences put up by the big cow outfits to protect their cattle from rustlers.

Morningstar, until about the time Jake got killed and his fence cutter outfit run out of the country, had been ramrod for the big Muleshoe outfit. Nobody but Muleshoe and Morningstar knew why Morningstar had quit or been fired from his ramrod job.

So much for Scanlan's ace-in-the-hole. Jake Scanlan.

Back at San Angelo, right after he had hired Till, the saloon man had leaned across the bar to speak in a barely audible whisper.

"That's Scanlan's son you just hired, Morningstar. I figured you might want to know."

"I knew it when I hired him. But I'm obliged, just the same," Bob Morningstar had said. "But don't tell anybody. Don't especially tip it off to any of this renegade pool trail outfit of mine that the kid is Jake's. I got my reasons."

obliged, just the same," Bob Morningstar the bartender said. "I reckon you know your own business."

CHAPTER TWO

Tale of a Dead Man

COWPUNCHERS are a breed of men unto themselves. From the time he is old enough to fork his first pony, a cowboy is on his own. Each hour spent in the saddle has its element of risk and danger. Because even a gentle horse can be dangerous if he steps into a prairie dog or badger hole and turns over on you. And from that first gentle pony on, a cowboy rides his reckless way, grinning at danger that has long ago lost any element of fear for him. Because if the young cowboy knows fear he swaps his saddle and sets himself afoot at less dangerous work.

There is the old saying, "once a cowboy, always a cowboy." And from that boyhood, on through youth to seasoned manhood and on through the gray-haired years to the end of his trail, he lives according to his lights and the unwritten cowhand code. When he violates that code he becomes an outlaw. A horse-thief gets hung.

Because of the very nature of his work, a part of his life spent in the saddle alone and on his own, to do his own thinking

and his job depending on his own judgment as a cowhand, a puncher is an independent man. He depends on nobody but himself in a tight. A cowhand knows and understands the full meaning of silence. And when there are two or three or a crowd of cowhands together and nobody talking it is an easy silence and awkward only when things to be said are left unsaid. Then the silence becomes wary.

Such was the silence between Bob Morningstar and Till Scanlan. Men of another breed would long ago have talked it out. But they let it ride in silence. Each watching the other. Sizing the other up. When their eyes met those eyes probed deep, searching for the least sign of that which would call for a break.

To be sure there was talk between them. But it had nothing to do with the real issue. It was the older man who led the talk and kept it on a joshing level. It was damned grim joshing but it served its purpose. And Till savvied it for what it was.

Morningstar was somewhere in his middle thirties. Scanlan was twenty. Morninstar had been ramrodding the big Muleshoe outfit for the past six years. Thus he was a cut above the average cowhand, a man to be respected. Scanlan was sill considered a kid.

Morningstar had killed Till's father. But Till knew that from the time the outfit had left San Angelo, Morningstar had given the wrangler protection. While protecting Scanlan, Morningstar had also taken good care of his own hide. There was no discounting that Scanlan owed his life to the cold judgment and quick action of Morningstar.

Neither feared the other when they lay down and slept side by side on the bank of the Pecos. With the cattle and remuda turned loose on feed and water. There was no danger of one of them waking to murder the other while he slept. That kind of treachery was not in them—and both knew it. When they came awake at daybreak they rolled over, sat up and grinned at each other in the early dawn.

It was the first night's sleep they'd had since they'd left San Angelo.

"Never even missed my soogans and pillow," the trail boss said. "Feel like tacklin' the job, Till?"

"Rarin' to go, Bob."

They washed in the river, ate dry jerky and saddled. They cut eight mules out of the remuda and headed back to where the chuck and bed wagon had been left behind. Behind with five dead men lying on the ground where they had shot one another down.

When they reached the wagons they put up a rope corral and corralled the mules. Each threw the chain harness on four mules and hooked the teams to the two wagons.

Morningstar made a gesture towards the five dead and their saddles on the ground.

"They ain't worth the trouble of buryin', Till. There wasn't a real man in that whole outfit. Bushwhackers. Renegades. Blacklegs. They stink no worse dead than ever they did alive. So we'll leave 'em where they lay."

Till and Morningstar tied their saddled horses to a wheeler on their four-mule team; they kicked off the brakes and headed for the Pecos.

Back at Horsehead Crossing they unhooked their teams and Till cooked them their first hot meal while Morningstar rode out among the spread-out, grazing cattle and horses.

After that meal was finished and their tobacco lit, Bob Morningstar squatted on his bootheels and looked at Scanlan.

"From here on, Till, if you want it thataway, we're pardners. This is our outfit, half yours, half mine. But before you declare yourself one way or the other, it's only fair to let you know what you're lettin' yourself in for. The Staked Plains is back yonder and behind us, but there's plenty more trouble ahead. It's bound to be dangerous. Sabe?"

"I savvy," Till Scanlan said.

"From here on, Till, we play it different than we played it comin' acrost the Plains. Me'n you never dirtied a gun barrel. We rode off an' let 'em kill one another because that was the easiest way—the easiest and safest way for me to get myself an outfit of my own. You was the only man in that outfit worth savin'. Now it's mine and I aim to hang onto it.

"But from here on, Morningstar will have to fight to hang onto what he's got for an outfit. And if you come in as my pardner you'll have to do your share of fightin'. I don't know what the odds against us will be, but they'll outnumber us a-

plenty. You ever killed a man. Till?"

"No." Till said quietly. "Jake always kept me clear of any gun ruckus. I stayed at our li'l' ol' two-bit ranch. Done the ranch chores. Rode fence. Put up hay. Broke broncs. Kept a few head of saddle horses handy for Jake and his men when they rode up. Now and then I helped with the brandin' or movin' a bunch of cattle of a moonlit night. But I taken no part in the fence cuttin'. I didn't belong to the fence cutters. So I had no chance to find out what I'd do in a gun ruckus. But I'll try to hold up my end of the pardnership in a tight, Bob. Though I don't know why, where or how I earned a half int'rest in this outfit of yourn."

"Jake ain't alive to tell you," Morningstar said. "Did you know I killed your father?"

"I heard it said, back at San Angelo. That's why I hired out to you. I had a notion, then, of payin' the debt off—and I ain't plumb outa that notion."

TILL made no gun move. His voice was quiet and a faint grin was on his face.

"I killed Jake." Morningstar's black brows pulled together in a deep scowl. "It was night. No moon. One man a-horseback looked like any other. It wasn't Jake I aimed to kill. And if he was here alive to tell you, Jake would swear he didn't know it was me he was shootin' at when he gimme this."

The trail boss pulled up his shirt and undershirt to reveal an ugly deep scar along his side.

"That was mighty close to a gutshot I got while I was shootin' him loose from his horse," he said slowly. "Then hell busted loose. There were guns behind every bush along that Muleshoe drift fence. My horse got me away from there, me hanging onto the saddle horn with both hands. I didn't know till next day it was Jake Scanlan I shot. That's what they told me at the Muleshoe headquarters ranch while the doc was hemstitchin' my belly.

"You sabe, Till?" Morningstar had a habit of saying that.

Till nodded his head, his hat tilted back.

"No, you don't," the boss said then. "Because I don't sabe, myself, what happened. Me'n Jake wasn't supposed to shoot at one another that night. We had 'er made beforehand. Each of us was to wear a white shirt. The hell of it was, there come up a storm after dusk and the sky blacked over till there wasn't moon ner stars a-showin', and it was black. Neither of us could see the other's white shirt. But that wasn't the half of it. Somewhere along the line both me and Jake got double-crossed. They out-wolfed me'n Jake. And we played it the way they figgered we'd play it. When all that hell busted loose, out of all that shootin' there wasn't one damned man shot.

The only two got it was me and Jake. Them bushwackers and Muleshoe cowpunchers supposed to be ridin' line along the drift fence was shootin' to miss. While the Rangers that was supposed to be takin' a hand in the deal was five miles away, on a wild goose chase. Then Jake Scanlan was dead and I was shot in the belly, the doc givin' me one chance in a hundred to make it. That's how the real he-wolf of the fence cutters ketched me and your old man in their own gun trap."

Till was puzzled. It showed in his eyes.

"Mebbyso you heard it told," Morningstar continued, "but most mebby you knew nothin' about it, doin' your chores at the Scanlan ranch. But Jake had been accused by the fence cutters of sellin' them out to Muleshoe."

"I heard Jake say that—and he called it a lie."

"It was also said that I'd sold out or bin scared into throwin' in with the fence cutters. They said I was rustlin' cattle from the Muleshoe outfit I was ramroddin'."

Scanlan nodded. Those men now dead out on the Staked Plains had accused Morningstar of being a rustler. They had taunted him with the accusation that Muleshoe had fired him, ordered him out of Texas. Morningstar had grinned it off, hard-eyed, without denial. Nor had he admitted it.

Morningstar said, "Some of that blackleg outfit me'n you saw kill one another off crossin' the Staked Plains were fence cutters; others was just rustlers told by the Rangers to git out of Texas.

"But the big he-wolf of 'em all," he continued, "is still on the prowl. I don't know who he is, but he's got guts and plenty cunning. And he ain't alone. Whoever he is, he's playin' a dangerous game for big stakes. He'll have a few hand-picked tough

cowhands with him when he holds up this herd of ourn. Gamble on it, Till. Somewhere along our trail that he-wolf and his hands is goin' to be layin' for us. You still want a pardnership in this outfit of stolen cattle, Till?"

"You can't deal me out now, Bob."

"You'll be reppin' for Jake Scanlan, Till. Pickin' 'er up where Jake dropped it."

"You said you and Jake set a gun trap, Bob."

"Me'n Jake stood accused of somethin' we wasn't guilty of. Up till then me'n Jake was enemies, though we'd punched cows together for forty-a-month for Muleshoe. Till Jake got fired for runnin' his own brand on too many mavericks claimed by Muleshoe. Jake shot and killed the feller that was ramroddin' Muleshoe, then declared war on the whole damned outfit. I was hired to ramrod Muleshoe—and fight for it. Jake throwed in with the fence cutters. We were again' each other, though we'd drink together in town and hooraw each other. Then when we each got accused of sellin' out, me'n Jake met and had medicine talk. Somebody was after our hides. Jake said he had a hunch who it was but wasn't tellin' me till he had proof. I had the same hunch and the same reason for keepin' my mouth shut. Our only bet was to lay low till we got proof. But we agreed on one thing: whenever we rode out along that drift fence at night we'd each wear a white shirt. So we wouldn't git tricked into killin' each other off. But it was too dark that night, and I still don't know why Jake rode at me a-shootin' till I had to kill him in self-defence, not knowin' who I was firin' at."

Scanlan had squatted there on his hunkers and let Morningstar talk. Since he was a button Till had heard his father cuss Morningstar—Morningstar and the Muleshoe. Bitterly, as a man will curse when his heart, brain and guts are seeped with the poison of hatred. Jake had sworn countless times, when half drunk, ugly and on the prod, that he would kill Morningstar when the sign was right and hang his tough hide on the Muleshoe drift fence.

But it was Jake, not Morningstar, who had been killed along the Muleshoe fence where the five-strand wire had been cut between ever fence post, for a mile. And according to the story told Till, that was not how his father got killed. Till had the story straight from Sheriff Bert Beeman the following day. It didn't take Beeman long to spill it.

Bert Beeman was a big range dude whose taste ran to red flannel shirts and pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooters. He wore his pants legs shoved into the fancy tops of his boots. A fine 5X beaver Stetson slanted across his curly black head to shadow a pair of gray eyes. Beeman was the county sheriff and jealous of his star. He didn't get along too well with the Rangers, who he claimed were over-rated glory-hunters. Muleshoe had elected Beeman, and he was loud-mouthed in his brag that he'd wipe out the fence cutters.

Beeman had ridden up that morning to the Scanlan place where Till was doing his chores.

"Hook up a team of them mules to a buckboard," Beeman had broken the news bluntly, "and go after that old man of yourn. You'll find his carcass where him and his fence cutters ripped a big gap in the Muleshoe fence. Morningstar shot him in the back." Sheriff Beeman had given Till further orders.

"When you git him buried, saddle a horse and drift. Quit Texas as fast as a horse kin pack you. And be damned sure you don't drive no livestock ahead of you when you pull out. Lemme ketch you coyotin' around my country and I'll throw you in jail an' lose the key. And there you'll stay, unless the Muleshoe outfit drag you out an' string you up. That's all, younker. Take warnin'."

When Till found the body, it was as Beeman said. Jake had worn a clean white shirt that night. There was a hole in its bloodstained back. One shot in the back had killed Scanlan. There was no other bullet wound. His six-shooter was still in its holster. The saddle carbine on the ground hadn't been fired. It didn't fit the story Morningstar told about Jake riding at him, shooting. One of Jake's bullets ripping a gash in the ramrod's belly. The only part that fitted was Jake wearing a white shirt.

MORNINGSTAR didn't talk like a liar. Not loud-mouthed tough like swaggering Beeman, but tough in a quiet way. It didn't seem to young Scanlan that Morn-

ingstar would squat there and lie. Because, in the first place, Morningstar wouldn't shoot another man in the back. He had killed men, but fair and square. In the second place Morningstar spoke as though something had happened that night that puzzled him.

Scanlan did some quick thinking. Morningstar had just handed him a fifty-fifty pardnership. He owed his life to Morningstar. That dog eat dog pool renegade outfit would have killed Till coming across the Staked Plains—because they'd found out who he was. Some of them had recognized Till as being Jake's son. Till owed it to Bob Morningstar to come clean—and he did.

"That ain't how I heard it, Bob," he began.

Till told him the story related by Beeman. "Jake was shot in the back. That's the only bullet hit him." He added, "Jake was wearin' a white shirt when he got killed."

"The man I shot had on a white shirt," Morningstar said. "Like I said, it was too dark to see, until you got right close. And I was close enough when I got shot. When I shot that man loose from his saddle I caught sight of the white shirt he was wearin'. Then I was hightailin' it away, hangin' onto my saddle horn. But that's the notion I got and carried away with me. The man had on a white shirt. Jake was supposed to be wearin' a white shirt, and I was wearin' one. All the time, when I laid on my bunk at the Muleshoe ranch fightin' to live, that stuck in my mind like a sand burr. They told me I'd shot Jake. Beeman told me. He'd come every day to see if I'd died. When he'd find me alive he'd set there straddle of a chair an' blow cigareet smoke in my face and tell me I'd killed Jake. Me'n' Beeman never got along too good. He wanted the job ramroddin' Muleshoe. When I got the job Bert was ringy about it. Beeman's a good cowman, as good as they come. And for all his braggin', Bert's tough. He's one of these gents that brags how he'll kill a man—and does it. Gittin' back to that white shirt. Somebody figgered a white shirt would protect him that night against my bullets. So he wore one. He spotted me. His first bullet hit me in the belly. He musta bin kinda surprised when he woke up in hell."

"Looks like it wasn't Jake you killed, Bob." Till Scanlan was damn well puzzled.

"Looks that-away."

"Then you don't owe me a thing," Till said slowly. "You kin take back my pardnership half int'rest in this outfit."

"I ain't an Injun giver," Morningstar told him. "Mebbyso that's part reason why I cut you in. But that's only a part of it. They'll tell you that I never gave a man anything in his life—and that's about the truth of it. I'm not a giver. And where friendship is concerned, I got broke of givin' my friendship to any man. I've had to fight for everything I got since I was a range-orphaned kid. Because I'm dark complected they called me Injun and treated me like one. If I've got Injun blood, I don't know it. But if I'm part Injun I'm proud of it. Anyhow they called me Injun and gut-eater, and I growed up mistrustin' all men. This is the first time I ever taken on a pardner with the hope of gettin' some kind of friendship out of it. And, so help me, Till, I don't know why it is that I'm trustin' you all the way. Unless it's because we got throwed into this jackpot together and we're goin' to need each other from here on. And we'll have to trust each other to the limit."

There was no softening in the black eyes. But Till understood that Morningstar was, for the first time in his life, giving his friendship to another man. It made young Till Scanlan feel warm inside.

"I'm just a bone-headed kid, Bob. But I savvy. And I won't let you down nowheres along the line. I'm glad we got this much talked out. Shore glad you didn't kill my father. Jake was ornery and tough but he never treated me mean and he done his best to raise me right after my mother died. I wasn't easy to raise right. Wouldn't go to school. I'd run off and come back to the ranch. I figgered a cowhand didn't need an education. But Jake never licked me for it. He said it was up to me. But he didn't want me to be a cattle-thief or a tough, gun-totin' kid. I was always half-scared of Jake. But I never hated him. And I hope to kill the man that shot him in the back. I'm glad it ain't you I've got to kill, Bob."

"I'm shore glad it ain't," Morningstar said slowly. "Because I've got a notion that's a job you'll git done some day. Unless I kin beat you to it. I mean killin' the man

that shot Jake in the back and throwed the blame on me."

CHAPTER THREE

The Coming of Sheriff Beeman

MORNINGSTAR left Till Scanlan there at Horsehead Crossing. He saddled and headed up the river for the cowtown of Pecos, to hire a crew of cowhands. It was a sixty-mile ride, he said as near as he could figure. He'd get back with his punchers as quick as he could.

The cattle and horses needed a week's layover. On good feed and water, they wouldn't need any herding. Just ride around 'em once in a while. It would give Scanlan time to rest up, get the wagons greased and in shape to move.

"Only one thing, Till," Morningstar told him. "If anybody rides up and you sight 'em a-comin', drag it. Have a horse saddled day an' night. Anybody tops your skyline, pull out. Head up the river. Hit the trail for Pecos. Don't stay here long enough to see who they might be. Especially if they come from acrost the Staked Plains. Don't even let 'em ketch sight of you. Don't pull up till you find me. Then we'll ride back together to claim our outfit. Because if they ketch Till Scanlan here alone, they'll kill you. You sabe?"

"I savvy, Bob," the kid said. "You mean it's Sheriff Bert Beeman you're expectin'?" Till grinned faintly.

"Beeman. Yeah."

"Or the fence cutter he-wolf."

"The big he-wolf of the fence cutters. Yeah."

"Could be," Till said, "Bert Beeman is the head man.

"You're ketchin' on, pardner."

"That's mebbyso who Jake ketched onto, Bob."

"Yeah. Me'n' Jake both. Beeman wouldn't be the first hombre to hide behind a badge to ramrod a rustlin' outfit."

Till promised he'd pull out for Pecos the minute he sighted riders coming from across the Staked Plains. Scanlan meant to keep that promise.

But fate, or whatever a man wanted to call it, took the play away from Till.

They came around midnight, the second night after Morningstar had pulled out.

They were so close that Till heard the creak of their saddles and the thud of their horses' hoofs. He slept with his clothes on. He barely had time to grab his boots, buckle on his cartridge belt and six-shooter and pick up his saddle gun and slip away in the night.

Till had cached his horse a half mile away, saddled and on a picket rope.

He bushed up in the shadows of the brush along the river bank. He heard them when they circled the camped wagons and then quickly closed in. Till got a count of them: six. Then they were milling around on horseback, guns in their hands.

"Nobody here, Bert!" a man called.

"There's gotta be somebody here. This outfit didn't move itself—and I don't believe in ghosts. Look around. You got your orders. Kill 'em where you find 'em. If it's Morningstar or the Scanlan kid, be damned certain you kill 'em plenty dead. Damn it to hell, they got to be here!"

Till Scanlan had heard and seen all he wanted. He slipped away on foot to where he had left his saddled horse picketed. He heard them riding back and forth; they kept calling out to one another as they made their search. The loud-mouthed cursing of Sheriff Beeman was loudest of all.

Till took his horse off the picket rope and slipped on the headstall. He tightened his front cinch, stepped up across the saddle and kept his carbine in his hand. They must have followed him because he caught sight of two, then three riders, from where he sat his horse behind high brush.

Beeman was cursing them. He'd found Till's bedroll where it lay spread out on the ground, tarp and top blankets thrown back where he'd quit his bed in a hurry.

"Here's one bed and, by hell, the blankets still warm. Damn it to hell, earn your money, you slow-motion, bellyachin' sons!"

Till saw one of the three riders pull up. For a moment Till thought he'd been sighted. Then the man called out, "Better go easy on that cussin' you're givin' us, Bert. You're off your home range now. That tin star is plumb useless. Us fellers don't have to take that kinda talk off no man."

"Morningstar just quit his blankets!" Beeman bawled. "Him or young Scanlan. And, by the hell, your better stop that long geared Injun son."

"You can't stop somebody you can't find in the dark. We just come acrost them damn' Staked Plains, mister. We're half dead fer sleep an' grub an' we ain't watered good. We're forkin' played-out horses, and we're afoot, and we ain't doin' nothin' that kin be put off till daylight. Come on, fellers. Let's camp. You want Morningstar an' Till Scanlan, Bert, go after 'em. And quit your big-mouthed roarin'. That's one thing we all got a belly full of."

Beeman's cussing died out to a growling snarl. There was an ugly whine to it. "You know better than to bow up on me, tough misters. I'm the law. And there ain't a man amongst you I can't hang, legal, back at San Angelo. Any time you tough hombres think this sheriff badge don't pack plenty authority, you're dead wrong. It shines bright anywheres in Texas."

"You kin tell that to the Rangers, Beeman," said the man who had called his hand. "Another thing. Whoever told you that star makes you bullet proof, lied to you."

Beeman's laugh was short. He was either scared, or ready to kill. "You talk too much, Windy. And you're too damn' dumb. I got you fellers out-figgered. If I ain't ridin' the point of this herd when it reaches Pecos, it'll be held up by the law. And you smart hombres will be shot off your horses or throwed in jail. I got a pardner waitin' for me at Pecos and he'll make it tough on you. You think I'd fetch a murdering outfit like you things along without protectin' myself from both ends of the trail? You fence cutter sons show up anywheres with this herd without me a-ramroddin' it, and your coyote hides will be hung on the law fence. That I'll guarantee, hombres! Now, damn your stinkin', two-bit souls to hell, work that brush till you find Morningstar! Then smoke him out where I kin cut 'im down!"

"Just like you cut Jake Scanlan down, Bert? With your gun shoved in Jake's back and his hands up? You want Morningstar so damn bad, go after him. You won't find him in the bed wagon where you're so busy a-huntin' 'im."

"Don't talk yourself into a gun-whippin', Windy!" Beeman snarled.

THE sheriff was on horseback now, riding away from the wagons, cursing Windy and the others. Till figured Beeman had located the whiskey keg in the bed wagon and tapped it. The whiskey Morningstar never touched. Till didn't like the stuff either.

Till knew the renegade called the Windy Kid. He wasn't much older than Till, but ornery, tough, treacherous and building himself a hard rep as a gun-slinger.

Windy heard Beeman coming and defiance oozed out of him. "Take 'er easy, Bert!" he whined, "Hell, I was just a-runnin' off at the head. You ought to know me, Sheriff."

The two renegades with Windy shared his cowardice. One called out to Beeman not to take it out on the rest because of the Windy Kid.

They were spread out, riding towards where Till sat his horse behind the brush. Cold sweat broke out on Scanlan's hide. He had delayed too long. They were within fifty yards, coming straight at his brush patch. Till reined his horse around. When he did he saw the two horsebackers who had ridden up from the other direction almost on top of him.

"Drop your gun!" a man said harshly.

Two saddle guns leveled at Scanlan. He dropped his carbine and bridle reins and lifted both arms.

The Windy Kid and the other two renegades spurred up. Windy, anxious to make a showing, might have shot Till if Beeman hadn't ridden up. He slapped Windy's gun down.

"You're shore a-beggin' for that whuppin' you're goin' to git directly," Beeman snarled at Windy.

Beeman crowded his horse alongside Till's. He shoved his face close and Till smelt whiskey on his breath. Beeman's pale eyes were bloodshot, wicked.

"Where's Morningstar?" he rasped.

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"He left me here." Till measured each word he spoke. "He left me here and told me not to coyote on him. Then he pulled out. That's all there is to tell."

Beeman reached out his left hand, yanked Till's six-shooter from its holster and shoved it into the waistband of his pants.

"When did Morningstar pull out?"

If Morningstar traveled as fast as he figured, he might be showing up before sunrise with his cowhands. But Till wasn't

telling Beeman that. Let this renegade outfit get to that whiskey keg and, played out and empty-bellied like they were, they'd get drunk damned quick. If Till could trick 'em into thinking it would be a day or two before Morningstar got back to the Horsehead Crossing. . . .

"Morningstar," Scanlon looked straight into Beeman's eyes, "left about sundown. He said he had to git himself a crew to move this herd. He went up the river."

"To Pecos?"

"I reckon."

"Work the brush," Beeman told his renegades. "Git a clean work on it. If the kid ain't lyin', Morningstar has gone to Pecos to hire hisself a few men. It's anyhow sixty miles from here to Pecos. And we kin ketch up on some roundsidin' before he shows up. But if you put ary value on your hides you better make damn certain he ain't bushed up here, before you belly up to that keg in the bed wagon."

"Likker, Sheriff?" That was Windy's voice.

"Likker. But you better be damn sure Morningstar is a long ways gone before you git drunk. Or have you forgot them carcasses we found rottin' on the Staked Plains back yonder. Them sons worked on likker while Morningstar drunk water or went dry. You git drunk at your own risk, hombres. So work the brush while I drag some talk outa Scanlan's brat."

"Likker!" The Windy Kid rode up on the other side of Scanlan.

"Remember me, you tow-headed son?"

Windy was tall and lean. His hair was dirt-colored; his skin had a muddy look and he was trying to grow a scraggly mustache. His nose had been flattened and dished so that his nostrils flared. When he grinned buck teeth showed yellow. His eyes were pale slits.

TILL remembered the Windy Kid, remembered his tough swagger and foul-mouthed bragging about the killings he'd done. How he was goin to beat the gun-notched record of Billy the Kid. He'd called Till the chore boy at Scanlan's place and missed no chance to taunt Till because Jake forbade his son to go along on the night-riding fence cutter raids.

"Yeah. I remember you, Kid."

"Then you know better'n to lie to me. Is Morningstar a long ways gone from here?"

"He shore is. And that's no lie."

The Windy Kid slapped Till across the mouth. The slap mashed Till's lips against his teeth and drew blood.

"Lemme give this tow-headed whelp a workin' over, Bert," Windy snarled.

"If you're man enough," Beeman promised. "After you help them hombres fan the brush. Now git!"

Beeman herded Till back to the wagons with his gun while his men rode through the brush on a hunt for Morningstar.

At camp, Beeman dismounted and told Till to get down. His six-shooter in his hand, the sheriff questioned Scanlan in a low tone.

"How come you throwed in with that outfit Morningstar fetched acrost the Staked Plains?" he asked.

"You told me yourself, Sheriff," Till said, "that Morningstar killed my father. I ain't lyin' when I say I hired out to Morningstar in hopes of gettin' a chance to kill him because he killed my daddy. But he was onto me and he never give me the chance. You gimme my travel orders to quit Texas. I was takin' them orders when I throwed in with that outfit. Every man in the outfit was quittin' Texas. I went along. But I never got a shot at Morningstar."

"You still hankerin' to kill him?"

"And I'll take it out in hankerin'." Till slapped his empty holster. "I can't kill him with bare hands, Sheriff."

"Mebbyso," Beeman grinned, "if you kin lick Windy till you got the paw and beller beat outa him, I'll give you back your gun. You plumb certain Morningstar killed your old man, ain't you?"

"Morningstar told me so hisself," Till said softly.

"I might give you a shot at Morningstar when he shows up. By the hell, I just might, young Scanlan!"

Sheriff Beeman chuckled. There was a glitter in his eyes. He was figuring out some scheme, and was pleased with it. A twisted grin was on his face.

"Jake Scanlan was tough—and he had guts." Beeman looked Till Scanlan over like a man sizes up a bronc that needs breaking. "Jake had brain, to boot. More brains than all the rest of that fence cutter

outfit put together—and you're the spittin' image of him. Trouble was, Jake got too big for his damn britches. Got to where he wouldn't take orders. Jake wanted to be the big ramrod of the fence cutters. That's why he got killed. You look like you got Jake's guts. And you ain't big-mouthed—like that Windy Kid. Give you an even break, you reckon you kin whup the hell outa Windy?"

"I'd be proud to try, Sheriff."

Beeman had the whiskey keg out of the bed wagon. He filled a tin cup from its brass spigot and drank the raw booze like water.

"You want a slug of this rotgut?" He grinned at Till.

"I don't use it, Sheriff."

"And you didn't git killed off crossin' the Staked Plains. Level-headed. Jake was a good man, sober. Likkered up, he got careless. When he got careless he got killed. You'll be sober when I match you against Windy. Windy will be half drunk. You kill off Windy, you kin have his job—and your gun. And I'll give you your chance to kill Morningstar. But before I let you tackle Morningstar, I'm goin' to watch you kill Windy."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kill Him—With Your Hands!

WINDY was half drunk, and getting uglier with each drink. He'd wanted to whip Till the minute he and the others rode back to camp. But Beeman told him to wait.

They had located the remuda and corralled the horses. They all caught and saddled fresh mounts to stake out for night horses. Till cooked them the first hot meal they'd eaten since they left San Angelo following the Morningstar herd across the Staked Plains. When they failed to locate Morningstar or his fresh sign, they felt like eating. But while they were waiting for Till to get their night supper cooked they were hitting the keg. And, empty-bellied and weary from loss of sleep as they all were, the booze took quick hold. They were all more or less drunk by the time Till hollered "grub pile."

But the Windy Kid tossed his tin plate back into the rawhide box and filled his tin cup to the brim with whiskey. "Who ever heard," he grinned, "of a prize fighter goin' into the ring with a stuffed gut?"

Scanlan had been using the pothook to lift the dutch oven lids; he had it gripped in his hand. He stood back from his supper fire and looked at Windy.

"Whenever you're ready, Kid," he said flatly.

"Throw away that damn pothook!" Windy snarled.

"When you shed your six-shooter."

Windy gulped down his whiskey and threw the empty cup at Till. Till ducked the cup and grinned.

Windy pulled his six-shooter—and pointed it straight at Till's lean belly. He might have shot Till then and there if Beeman hadn't growled, "Drop that gun, Kid. You bin spoilin' for a fight. Let's see if you're half as hard to whip as you claim. I claim you got a yellow streak. Show me different."

"I'll show you a damnsight diff'rent," Windy snarled. He hooked his forefinger in the trigger guard, spun the gun a few times, then dropped it with his hat on the ground.

Till threw aside the pothook. He was ready when Windy charged. They were about the same height and build. But Windy had experience. He had tangled in every free-for-all fight he could get into around town and he knew every trick of rough-and-tumble fighting.

Till had some savvy, too. A boy couldn't grow up in that part of the Texas country without fighting. Jake had taught him some of the tricks and a little of the real science of ring fighting that he had picked up somewhere. So Till knew what to expect. Also, he had the advantage of being sober, clean-winded and quick.

"I'm killin' you, you tow-headed son!" Windy yelled as he charged.

Till sidestepped the charge, hooked a right into Windy's belly. The Kid stumbled and almost went down. Till moved in and ran into a flailing left. Blood spurted from his nose, pain shot up into his eyes. Then Windy crashed into him. They tangled and went down.

No holds were barred. Anything went. The men who let their grub get cold to watch the fight hollered advice, made bets and now and then gulped coffee spiked with booze.

Beeman had drunk more than any of them but wasn't drunk. He stood back, his hand on his his six-shooter. He said nothing. Made no bets. Beeman was waiting, watching to find out just how tough this son of Jake Scanlan's would be.

Till took as much punishment as he gave. Perhaps more. Because he didn't bite or gouge. Once the Kid's thumb had gouged his left eye and the pain had almost blinded him. He'd twisted out from under and smashed his way free and over on top. He drove rights into the Kid's face with short, savage, punishing blows. Windy went down. Windy snarled and whined to be let up. That he'd had enough. "I got a-plenty! Lemme up! Don't hit me no more!"

Windy went limp. Till, straddle of his belly, scrambled up onto his feet and stood back. He was blowing hard. Sweat was dripping off him. He backed off a few steps, fists clenched.

Windy rolled on his side and lay there doubled up, holding his belly with both hands like his wind was knocked out. He lay there, sodden with sweat, blood and dirt, sucking in his breath with heaving gasps.

"I told you to kill him!" It was Beeman's voice. He stood back in the shadows beyond the firelight, watching not only Windy and Till, but every renegade in his outfit. A fight like that can, in a flash, get snarled in a free-for-all ruckus. Watching a fight brings out the fight in the watchers. Bert Beeman knew that and was ready for it. He was ramrod of this outfit just as long as he had the upper hand. No longer. If that wolf pack turned on their leader, he'd have to shoot and shoot first.

"I told you to kill him!" Beeman snarled again. "Git at it!" He'd called neither fighter by name.

Till took it to mean him. He heard that voice drumming in his ears. He had to kill Windy in order to get back his gun. Once he got his six-shooter. . . .

Till moved toward Windy there on the ground; moved at a shuffling walk. He didn't know how to kill a man with his bare hands . . . choke him to death . . . kick his brains out. . . . You can't kick a man to death when he's down and hollering he's had enough.

"Kill him, I said!" Beeman's voice cracked like a bullwhip.

THE Windy Kid was on his feet. He came up as though on springs. Till didn't see the long-bladed knife in his hand until it slashed at him. He threw himself sideways, stumbled and went down, Windy coming after him with the knife. The Kid kicked him in the face, then in the belly. Till doubled up. Windy tripped over him. Till rolled against the Kid's legs, grabbed one spurred boot and yanked. It threw Windy headlong. Till was on the Kid's back. He grabbed his wrist, yanked it back, twisted the arm up in a hammerlock and pried the knife loose. When the knife fell Till grabbed it. Held it gripped in his hand.

"Cut his damn' throat!" Beeman called.

No mistaking it now. Beeman was giving killing orders to Scanlan.

"What the hell, Beeman!" a renegade called. "Who the hell you want killed?"

Till had the knife in his hand. Since he could remember, he hated a knife. He had the average white man's fear of steel. He threw it away now and got to his feet.

"Gimme my gun," he said, sweating.

JOE NYE*

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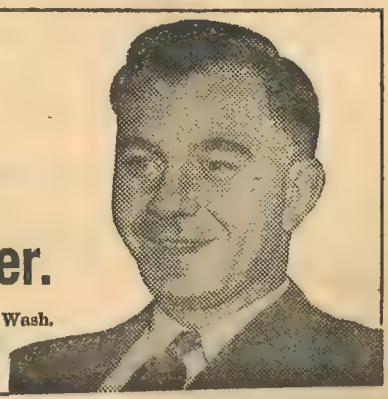

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"Grab your gun, Kid, Grab it quick."

Till walked quickly over to Beeman. His left eye was swollen to a thin sliver from being gouged. He knuckled his right eye with a dirty fist and reached out his right hand.

Beeman was handing Till his six-shooter, butt first, when Windy crouched low over where his six-shooter was in his hat on the ground. Windy thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger.

The .45 slug whined between Scanlan and Beeman. Till twisted, cocking his gun and firing from down near his belt. Behind him, Beeman's six roared.

Windy let out a short, sobbing grunt and pitched headlong, dead, his battered face in the dirt. Two slugs were embedded in Windy's body. One in his thigh, the other his heart.

"Them two boneheaded sons," said Beeman, "had me straight in the line of their damned guns."

Scanlan stood sweating and blowing, the smoking six-shooter in his hand. He stepped backwards, watching the four renegades who had drawn guns. He felt something poke him hard in the small of the back.

Beeman packed a second gun in a holster inside his waistband and under his red flannel shirt. That gun was in his left hand now, prodding Scanlan in the back. The sheriff's other gun swung to cover the renegades.

"Take it easy, hombres." Beeman's voice was deadly. "Don't none of you act foolish. I'm back in the shadow but every damn' one of you is a target I can't miss. You, Scanlan, stand your hand. Either you're on my side or you git your backbone busted by a bullet. Name it."

"I'm sidin' you, Sheriff."

Till's voice had a far-away sound in his own ears.

"That's how she stands, hombres," Beeman said. "Anybody pickin' it up for that Windy Kid?"

"Nobody," a man said. "Nobody. You're the sheriff."

The speaker shoved his six-shooter back into its holster. The other three did likewise.

"It's about time," said the man who had put away his gun first and spoke for the others, "that this outfit bought a drink. I always wanted them Chihuahua spurs of Windy's. I've wanted them for a long time."

"Windy," said another renegade, "has bin beggin' fer it too long."

"Always a ribbin' trouble . . ." was a third man's put-in.

"Like we found the sign comin' acrost the Staked Plains," said the fourth. "Let the dead bury the dead."

"You killed the Windy Kid, Scanlan." There was an ugly chuckle in Beeman's voice. "Now git a shovel an' plant him before he commences to stink up the camp. Drag his carcass off a ways with your saddle rope."

Scanlan shoved his six-shooter into its holster in hopes that if he didn't have it in his hand Beeman wouldn't think to take it from him. Either Beeman forgot to take back Till's gun or was letting him keep it on purpose. He walked past Till towards the whiskey keg, shoving his second gun back out of sight under his red flannel shirt. He still held the other gun in his right hand when he got his cup and filled it.

Till didn't bother to wash the blood, sweat and dirt from his head and face. He picked up the short-handled shovel from where it lay on the ground near the supper fire.

"Show me where you want the grave dug, Sheriff."

"Anywheres. Don't git beyond the firelight. Try to rabbit, you'll git dropped quick in your tracks. And git the job done quick. You're on night guard here, one of us with you. You four hombres take turns. Settle it between you who goes on first guard. I'll be on prowl guard."

TILL started to walk off, carrying the shovel. If he could only keep his gun he might be able to slip from the firelight and bush up in the shadows. With Beeman and the renegades there in the firelight he'd have the sheriff where he damn well wanted him. He could throw down on Beeman from the dark and make him and his men reach. He could collect their guns, then set 'em afoot for Morningstar and his crew to settle.

"Hold on, Scanlan!"

Sheriff Beeman stood with his whiskey cup in one hand, his six in the other. There was a glitter in the man's pale eyes.

"Ain't you fergot somethin'?" Beeman taunted.

"You mean the Kid's carcass, Sheriff?" Till stalled him. "I figgered I'd git a grave dug first, then git a horse an' drag Windy over to the grave with a ketch rope." Till felt sweat stinging the bruises on his face.

"When you borrowed the loan of your gun," Beeman's voice was ugly, "you wanted it fer to use on Windy."

Till nodded. He forced a grin across his battered face. Beeman's six-shooter continued pointing at him.

"Yeah."

"Well, you used the gun." Beeman lifted his cup and drank the whiskey slowly. Then he tossed the empty cup aside. It clattered into the dishpan.

The sound of it tensed the four men. Beeman was ugly drunk now. When he got like that he took delight in picking on a man, taunting him and prodding him into making some kind of a defensive move. Then he'd use that as an excuse to kill his victim—or whip him around with the barrel of the gun. He was needling Scanlan. Beeman had ribbed the fight between Windy and Scanlan. Beeman had backed Till to the limit; given him back his gun so that he could kill Windy. Now let Beeman prod this Till into making a gun move. They'd enjoy watching Beeman murder Scanlan.

"You got no fu'ther use for that smoke-pole." Beeman walked towards Till. "Have you, Scanlan?"

Till watched the big red-shirted Beeman coming slowly forward. "Well, you tow-headed young son! You got ary fu'ther use for that gun?"

"Not till Morningstar shows up." Till stood his ground. He had the shovel gripped in his gun hand. He couldn't drop it and claw for his six-shooter fast enough to beat Beeman.

"Not till Morningstar shows up, eh? What kinda damn answer you call that, Scanlan?"

"You told me you'd gimme my chance to kill the man that shot Jake Scanlan, Sheriff."

A renegade laughed. It was a short, ugly laugh that brought a snarl from Bert Beeman.

"What's so damn' comical, Brazos?" He cut a hard look at the man.

"Just somethin' jogged my funnybone, Bert," Brazos said. "Somethin' I just recollected. It's funny as all hell and gone."

"I'll jog your funnybone with a bullet, Brazos, if you git to recollectin' too far back."

"Take it out on Jake's whelp," said Brazos, his voice surly.

"Drop that gun I loaned you," Beeman told Till, "on the ground. Then walk away from it till I tell you to stop."

Till dropped the six-shooter and backed away. Beeman told him to turn around and walk straight.

Those dozen steps Scanlan took were the hardest he had ever taken in his life. Fear crawled inside his belly. An icy shiver ran like a frozen wire along his spine. He expected to be shot in the back. He knew now for certain that Beeman had shot his father in the back.

"Start diggin'!"

The sound of Beeman's voice jerked Till to a halt. He shuddered. Beeman laughed. The other four echoed it, like it was a good josh on Till Scanlan but that Till wasn't getting the point of the joke.

Then Sheriff Bert Beeman stood on widespread legs and cursed Scanlan for all the foul names he could think up.

"Dig, you tow-headed son! Dig 'er wide enough fer two! Big enough to hold the Windy Kid and your carcass. Brazos will drop you in your tracks when you git the hole dug. Brazos likes to recollect things. Killin' Jake Scanlan's boy will give Brazos somethin' more to recollect that's so comical it joggles his funnybone. Git on with your grave-diggin', Scanlan!"

The booze was keeping Beeman, Brazos and the others awake. Whiskey quirted their weariness. They drank black coffee mixed with keg whiskey; it would be daybreak before any of them would bed down. As long as Beeman was awake and on the prod nobody dared sleep for fear he might take out his temper on them when they lay helpless.

Brazos wanted the dead Windy's Chihuahua spurs but for some superstitious reason was afraid to unbuckle the spur straps. Beeman had turned over the job of riding herd on Till to the big, raw-boned, black-whiskered Brazos. Brazos called to Till to quit leaning on his shovel and finish that hole. He told him to get the Windy Kid's carcass dragged over there before Windy stunk up the camp. And to unbuckle those

big, silver-mounted Chihuahua spurs from the dead man's boots.

The grave was still shallow when Brazos walked over to where Till was digging and kicked him hard from behind. Till went sprawling into the grave. Brazos got a laugh out of that.

"Young Scanlan," he called out, "is tryin' out his grave fer fit!"

He told Till to git up outa there, drag the Windy Kid's carcass over here and dump it in.

Till laid down the shovel and Brazos gun-herded him back to where Windy lay. He told Till to git them spurs off the Kid's boots. And to damn well quit stallin' for time.

"Mebbyso when I drop you in alongside Windy, with your one-way ticket to hell punched with a .45, our big ramrod Sheriff Bert Beeman will be weary of polishin' his tin star an' us fellers kin git some sleep. Rattle your dewclaws, you tow-headed coyote!"

Brazos was ornery. Beeman was forcing him to kill Scanlan so that he'd have a murder charge to hold against Brazos. Brazos didn't mind murder. Till knew that. Brazos had stopped at the Scanlan place often enough for Till to know him. Brazos ramrodded one bunch of the fence cutters. Killing was his trade. Killing and cattle rustling. Where the Windy Kid was loud-mouthed about it, Brazos killed and kept his mouth shut. Brazos had murder in his bloodshot eyes now as he watched Till unbuckle the spurs. The gun in his hand looked big as a cannon.

Till squatted there beside Windy, sweating. He was cold and sick inside with the dread of death. His fingers fumbled at the spur straps. His stomach didn't seem to have any bottom.

It was while he was unbuckling the second spur that Till caught a glimpse of Windy's six-shooter on the ground beside the dead hand. He humped over his grisly chore to shadow his movements. Brazos had made another of his gruesome jokes and was looking towards the others to get their grins. Nobody saw Till pick up the gun and shove it out of sight under his shirt. He unbuckled the second spur and tossed it at Brazos' feet and then began dragging the body across to the shallow grave."

CHAPTER FIVE

New Ramrod for Muleshoe

DAWN was painting the sky red when Scanlan slid Windy's body into the grave. He felt the coldness of the gun under his shirt. A quick look told him that they'd let the fire die. Till, the grave and its body were in shadow. He tried to figure out how he'd drop flat in the grave alongside Windy. He'd pull the gun and make his last bid against tough odds. He'd get killed, but he'd kill Brazos and Beeman, if he lasted that long.

Beeman stood near the dying campfire, a tin cup of whiskey in one hand, his six-shooter in the other.

Brazos squatted on his hunkers with a cup of whiskey. He had his six in his hand. Now and then he'd reach back and spin the rowels of the Chihuahua spurs. The rowels spun with a musical sound that was jarring in the silence.

The other renegades were squatted around drinking whiskey and fighting off drowsiness. Then Till Scanlan's nerves tautened and all the pain, dread, fear and bruised pain was gone.

Morningstar was back!

Scanlan got one second's glimpse of Morningstar not a hundred yards away, standing with a saddle carbine in his hands. Even as Till looked up and saw him, the big, black-haired Muleshoe ramrod stepped back again behind the brush. Somehow Till knew Morningstar had been bushed up there for quite a while, and that the man was alone.

Brazos had watched Till slide Windy into the grave. He got to his feet, jingled his spurs and hitched up his sagging cartridge belt. He'd finished his drink. His six-shooter was tilted, his thumb on the hammer.

"Hold it, Brazos!" Beeman's voice was a lash.

Brazos lowered the gun, his thumb still on the hammer and turned to look at Beeman.

"I changed my mind," Beeman said. "I'm givin' Scanlan's boy his chance to kill Morningstar."

There was an ugly chuckle in Beeman's voice. He dangled his empty tin cup in his left hand and walked with that swaggering

gait he had over to where they had put the whiskey keg on the table endgate of the chuck wagon. But instead of filling the cup he laid it on the rawhide-covered endgate table beside the keg and picked up a saddle gun that was there and stepped in behind the chuck wagon.

The others, each man of them more or less drunk, watched Beeman with a sort of sulled curiosity.

"The Windy Kid," Beeman chuckled, "had a six-shooter in his hand when he died. You're a-standin' about where the Windy Kid laid, Brazos. Look around there on the ground. You see ary gun layin' there?"

Brazos looked down at the ground, then lifted his head. "No sign of a six-shooter," he said.

"Now where do you reckon it musta disappeared to, Brazos? You're so damned smart-brained about recollectin' gun matters. You and your damned Chihuahua spurs." Beeman was snarling. "You bin a-spinnin' them rowels till the damn' noise was enough to drive a man locoed. So damned buzzard-anxious to git them spurs picked off Windy's carcass you let Scanlan pick up the Kid's gun right under your eyes. You big, black-muzzled, thick-skulled buzzard! And you wonder why you and sheep-brained things like you is still workin' fer two-bit wages instead of ramroddin' your own spread. Serve you right, Brazos, if Scanlan gut-shot you. But I got other plans fer Scanlan and that gun he picked up."

Scanlan's right hand slid inside his shirt and gripped the gun. He was ready to drop flat on his belly. His nerves were tight and every muscle in his body tensed.

"Let's see how tough you are, Scanlan!" Beeman called. "You want a shot at Morningstar. I'm a-givin' it to you, like I promised I might. You see that little brush patch about fifty yards yonder from the grave you're standin' in? Well, Morningstar is bushed up there. I got a notion you seen him duck in behind there. So cut loose. Smoke 'im out. It's long range for a six-shooter, but you ain't in no shape to be choosy. You empty your gun into the brush. I kin tell from here if you're shootin' to hit him. First shot you aim that don't go into that brush, I'll bust your back with a .30-30 bullet. Start shootin'!"

Scanlan stood facing the chuck wagon. All he could see of Beeman was the man's lower legs.

Brazos stood there, big, raw-boned, black whiskered, too drunk to move fast or think fast. The other renegades were in the open near Brazos. They were squatting, gripping their guns, trying to sober up fast. Beeman had spoken the name of Morningstar. This might be one of his damned ornery jokes. But, on the other hand, if Morningstar was actually bushed up out there, they were just so many targets for the Muleshoe ramrod's gun. They wanted to hit the brush, but dared not move. A wrong move right now would draw gunfire.

"Start shootin'!" Beeman barked.

Scanlan threw himself flat alongside the body of the Windy Kid in the shallow grave. He heard the whine of the .30-30 bullet and the sharp crack of Beeman's saddle gun. The bullet missed Till by inches.

FROM the brush patch that hid Morningstar another .30-30 went into action, sending slugs in a rapid-fire hail.

Brazos was firing but he doubled up when a bullet drilled his belly and knocked him down. A second bullet drilled his face in the middle of his black beard and tore out his skull.

The other three renegades grabbed saddle guns and put up a desperate stand. But the bullets from Morningstar's saddle gun were well aimed. The renegades had no target to shoot at but a patch of brush. They kept firing at that brush until one by one they fell before the Muleshoe ramrod.

Morningstar's voice cut through the din of the gunfire, calling to Till Scanlan. "Dig in deep, pardner! I got the deal now! Keep that head of yourn down! You don't want to leave your Morningstar pardner shorthanded! Lay low, pardner!"

Morningstar's saddle gun punctuated each bitten-off command. For those first few moments, while the bullets whined close above him, Scanlan did as he was told. He needed nobody to tell him not to lift his head. Either somebody was shooting at him or some of the bullets were going low, because now and then a slug hit the edge of the shallow grave and kicked dirt into Till's face. A bullet thudded into the body of the Windy Kid so close to Till's head

that he saw the slug hit the dead renegade's back where it tore the shirt and went onto the dead flesh and bone beneath.

Then the din of the gunfire slackened. One by one death was silencing the renegade guns. Finally only two saddle carbines were spitting.

Morningstar's voice sounded gritty when he called out again. "Stay down, Till! You got to stay down. I kin see you lift your head. Damn it, boy, flatten out. That's Jake Scanlan's killer shootin' at you. Tell young Till who killed Jake, Beeman. Clean your dirty slate before you die!"

"Die, hell!" Beeman bellowed. "Where's your Muleshoe fightin' cowhands, Morningstar?"

"They're on their way, Beeman. They'll be here tomorrow, next day."

"Not before then? You lone-handed?"

"I'm playin' this lone-handed, Beeman. Will you step out in the open and meet me? Or deal 'em like this?"

"You're hit, Morningstar. I kin tell by the sound of your voice. I got your ticket punched, you Injun son!"

Scanlan had his six-shooter gripped in a sweaty hand. He lifted his head slowly. A .30-30 bullet drilled the crown of his hat and he ducked. His hat was off when he lifted his head again. Again he saw those two legs with the pants shoved into the boot tops, not a hundred feet away. He pulled the trigger and heard Beeman's sharp yelp of pain. A .30-30 slug kicked dirt into Till's face. He was white hot inside now. No fear left in him. No caution. He'd hit Beeman in the leg. He saw the two legs moving crazily and fired again. Then he saw the red flannel shirt there on the ground behind the wagon wheel, through the wagon spokes.

Till heard Morningstar shouting at him but he hadn't time to listen or pay heed. Beeman's red flannel shirt was his target and Scanlan emptied his six-shooter at it. He didn't know if Beeman was shooting back at him or not. . . .

Till Scanlan didn't know he'd scrambled up onto his feet and was standing straddle of the Windy Kid's body. Standing spread-legged and thumbing back the hammer and pulling the trigger of an empty six-shooter that had fired the five cartridges the Windy Kid had left in the gun when he died. Scanlan saw nothing but the red flannel shirt. Heard nothing until he heard the voice of Morningstar.

"You'll tucker yourself plumb out, pardner," Morningstar said. "Looks like even a tow-headed thing would have better sense, than to just stand there shootin' at a dead man with an empty gun.

Scanlan saw Morningstar standing at the edge of the grave looking down at him. A grin was on his lean dark face.

Morningstar's voice sounded like it did the other day when Till had drunk too much river water and got sick. Sort of a lazy, joshing drawl. ". . . Anyhow that's no place for a feller to be standin'. . . ."

Morningstar reached down with both hands and pulled Scanlan up out of the grave and led him down to the river bank, Till stumbled along as though walking in his sleep. Then his legs gave way and he sat down and was sick.

When he had retched up everything, Morningstar fetched him a clean tin cup filled with whiskey.

"It's good medicine when it's used right, pardner. Fact is, I'm takin' the same dose."

They sat there side by side on the bank of the Pecos at Horsehead Crossing and gulped the whiskey. They grinned at each other.

"Beeman said you was shot, Bob," Scanlan said.

"That's what I wanted him to think. So's he'd git careless, mebby. But you taken the play away from us both. I drilled your fool hat when I seen your damn fool head raise up. But that didn't stop you. And you got only God to thank that Beeman's bullet didn't tear your skull wide open instead of kickin' dirt in your face. And then you did cut loose: shot both legs out from under Beeman. I killed him when he went down. Then you reared up on your hind legs and proceeded to empty that six-shooter at his carcass. I hope you never git that gun-mad at me. You didn't shoot to miss, son. I just taken a look at what's left of that nickle-plated sheriff's star. You plumb ruined it."

Morningstar said that now they'd never know just who killed Jake Scanlan or it was Morningstar had killed that night.

"I know," Till said. "While I was diggin' that grave. Brazos and Bert Beeman was both half drunk and talkin' low but I heard enough to git the drift, though neither

of 'em knew I overheard the talk. . . .

"Jake had put on a white shirt, and some one of their fence cutter outfit had sighted you wearin' a white shirt. Beeman caught on quick. He told 'em all to put on white shirts when they bushed up along the fence. When Jake showed up Brazos throwed down on him with a gun. Bert Beeman shot Jake in the back. That was before they reached the fence. Jake was dead when they packed him there on his horse and dumped him. When you showed up one of them fence cutters rode out to collect the big bounty Beeman put on your hide. But you got away. Beeman figgered you was gut-shot and would fall off your horse before you got to the Muleshoe ranch, and you'd die there. And it'd look like Bob Morningstar and Jake Scanlan had shot each other. Like Jake had gutshot you, then run for it. And you'd shot him in the back. That's how it happened that night. Beeman was there all right. Like you and Jake figgered he'd be. But he out-wolfed you both. That's all. . . ."

Morningstar had fetched Till's warsack from his bedroll, along with his own, and they stripped to the hide and scrubbed off in the river. Till told how he'd been caught, and about his fight with the Windy Kid and how Brazos and the Kid and these other renegades feared and hated Beeman.

Morningstar said Beeman had hand-picked them because he had enough on them to hang every last man. Beeman had played both ends against the middle. He was the big he-wolf ramrod of the fence cutters. He cashed in on their cattle rustling. Jake Scanlan was the only fence cutter strawboss he had whom he couldn't hang for murder. And when it looked like Jake had caught onto him, Jake had to be killed.

"I'd had a medicine talk with Jake," Morningstar said. "He was goin' to quit the fence cutters and come back to work for the Muleshoe. But he and I both knowed we had to wipe out the fence cutters—every damn last man of 'em. Includin' and mainly the big ramrod that give the fence cutters their orders and claimed the big profits from their cattle rustlin'. Jake Scanlan and me both got shot."

A DOZEN heavily-armed cowhands rode up. They all forked Muleshoe horses and came down the river from Pecos. They had been waiting there at Pecos all the time, to pick up this trail herd. Morningstar had beaten them back to Horsehead Crossing by an hour or more. The man had traveled fast.

Morningstar introduced Till to them as Jake Scanlan's boy Till that will do to take along.

"From here on," said Morningstar, "Till Scanlan rides the point with me. And when we reach that new Muleshoe range in New Mexico, Till Scanlan will take the job that was to be Jake Scanlan's. Ramroddin' the New Mexico Muleshoe."

Which was news to Till. The best news he'd ever hoped to hear. And he felt almighty proud about it.

Morningstar told Till they had jailed the man with the deputy sheriff's badge that Sheriff Bert Beeman had deputized and planted at Pecos. The man who was to hold up the herd there for a sort of fake inspection to clear the herd for a quick sale at Fort Sumner. The special deputy, one of Beeman's fence cutters, had squealed his head off and the law was sending him to the pen.

Morningstar asked Till if he still had his tally book. When Till showed it Morningstar checked it with his and told Till they'd tallied the stolen cattle steer for steer. The law would hold up the herd at Sumner at Morningstar's request. Because that's where the Muleshoe was taking official delivery of this herd. The owners of the stolen cattle would be paid off according to the Fort Sumner tally and everything put in the Muleshoe iron.

"From there on, Till, it's your herd. I'll lope on ahead from Fort Sumner to the new Muleshoe ranch, about a day's horseback ride on the Pecos. It's a shore purty range. And the headquarters ranch is the answer to a cowman's dream. Adobe buildings and good corrals and horse pasture. Big old cottonwoods fer shade. It was to be Jake Scanlan's outfit. Now it'll be all yourn, Till. I got no doubt about your bein' able to handle it. There's a regular New Mexican colony there. They're your vaqueros and ranch hands. The women do the cookin' and the grub's good. Evenin's they sit around and play a guitar an' sing ranchero songs. Saturday nights they hold a *baile* and you kin dance blisters on

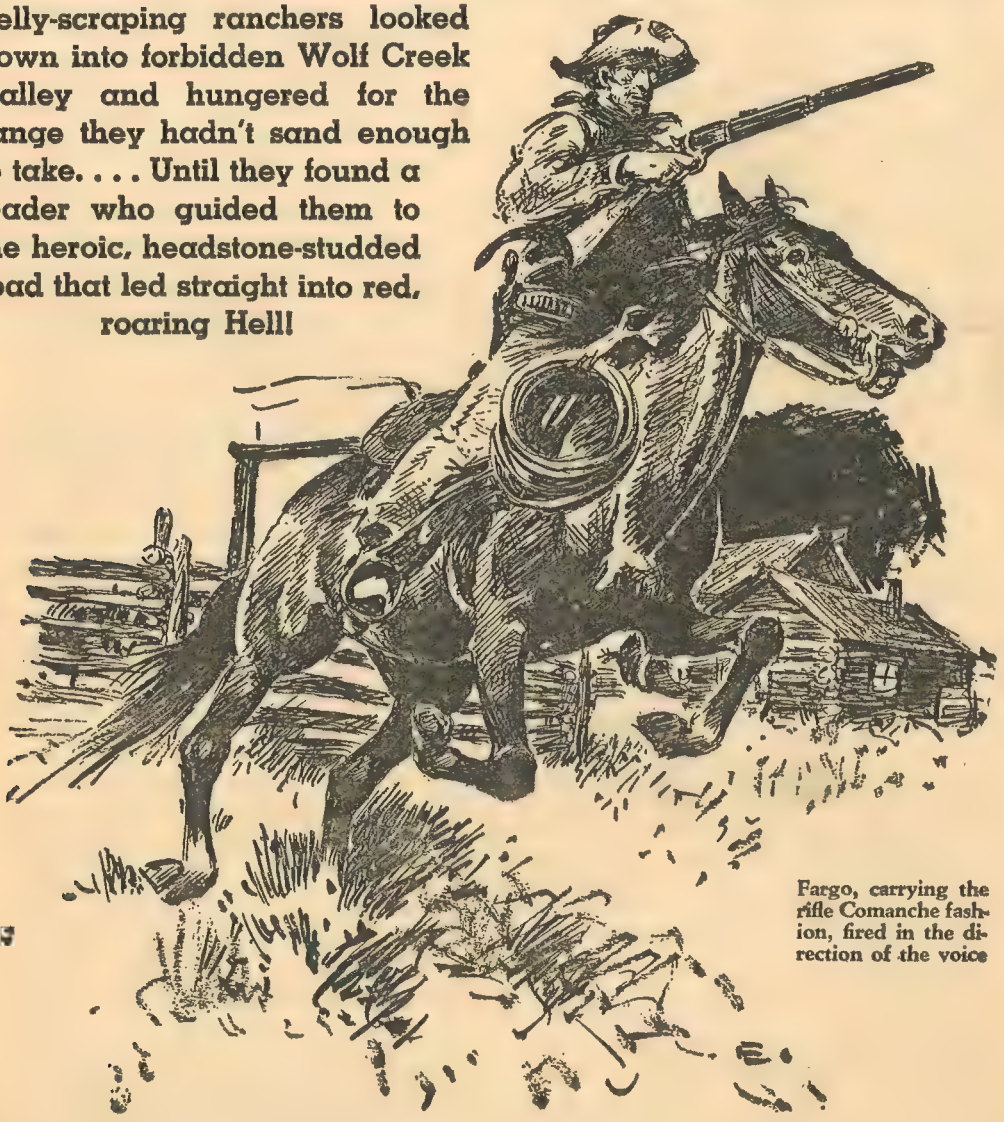
(Please turn to page 96)

TWILIGHT OF THE GUN-GODS

By
THOMAS THOMPSON

From the high rims, those two-bit, belly-scraping ranchers looked down into forbidden Wolf Creek Valley and hungered for the range they hadn't sand enough to take. . . . Until they found a leader who guided them to the heroic, headstone-studded road that led straight into red, roaring Hell!

IT WAS long past midnight but Fargo Lane was fully clothed, even to his battered high-crowned hat and run-over boots. For the last two hours he had not bothered to replenish the wood in the sheet metal stove that served for both cooking and heat in his single room cabin. The



Fargo, carrying the rifle Comanche fashion, fired in the direction of the voice

cold seeped through the crack under the door. Outside in the corral the three horses that comprised his remuda, one saddled and ready, blew uneasily and nuzzled empty feed boxes. Fargo levered a shell into his rifle and shifted the six-shooter at his belt.

He got up once and paced back and forth across the cluttered room, the shadow of his lean, six-foot frame spilling across the floor, climbing the wall and breaking on the low ceiling. He lighted a cigarette and the flare of the match washed across his hard face. It was an angular face, the face of a young man made old by hard work and worry. Only the eyes remained young. In their smoky depths a hint of a dream remained. He twisted the half-smoked cigarette between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Down in the bottoms the cattle set up a startled bawling. It had started then; Big Les Calvert would strike at the cattle first.

In that moment Fargo thought more of the cows than of himself. Less than a hundred head in all, he had nursed them along from yearlings, shifting them to the best graze on his cockleburr spread, living with them, sleeping with them. They were running now, hazed on by the crack of six-shooters, the shouts of Lightning C men. Dumb, wall-eyed, unthinking beasts, running off their hard-won tallow, not knowing why they were forced to run. Fargo ran to the corral, mounted the saddle horse and headed at a gallop toward the bottoms.

It was a black night, congealed with cold, and the dozen or more Lightning C riders who choused the now stampeding cattle were mere blots of black against black. Cut wire squealed twanging complaint; the bark of guns; the bellow of cows; the guttural command of Big Les Calvert himself: "The hell with 'em boys! Drive 'em over the bank!"

Fargo, carrying the rifle in his right hand, Comanche fashion, leveled the gun as if it were a toy and fired into the darkness in the direction of the voice.

For a second the shouting stilled, then it was renewed and the massed riders turned and headed back, flaming guns hammering. Fargo fired at these, the only targets he had. He heard the cough of a mortally wounded horse, the scream of a man. Lead burned close to his face. He looped his reins around the saddle horn, threw himself free while his horse was at a full lope. Hitting the ground, he rolled and found the protection of brush. The riders bore down on him, yelling now like whiskey-crazed Indians.

He didn't dare fire back now for they were too close. They were all around him there in the darkness. Time and again he heard the coarse, confident voice of Big Les; once he made out the cursing of Tang Reed, Lightning C foreman. Someone—Fargo didn't know them all by name—said, "I've had enough, Tang. He'll take the hint now."

Reed said, "Hell, we've only started. Ain't that right, boss?"

Fargo couldn't hear the answer, but he knew Calvert would agree. Big Les was a thorough man in his hates, and he had cause, just or not, to hate Fargo Lane.

THEY gave up searching for him in time. He heard the horses turn, knew they were cutting across the lower pastures toward his shack by the spring. He pictured Big Les, towering in the saddle, riding erect with face set, riding as if the night were full day. A ruthless giant of a man who made his own law; a man who claimed all Wolf Creek Valley and was now giving a preliminary scanning to the endless land that lay beyond. He was more than a cattle king, this Big Les. He was a law—a tradition. A thing as immovable as the peaks that punctured the ever present cloud banks there to the south.

These things Lane had known when he came to Wolf Creek. Small ranchers scattered about the rim of Calvert's self-appointed domain spoke of it often, but in an off-hand, amused way, like men afraid to face an issue.

"What the hell?" one had said. "You got to admit that if it wasn't for Les none of this country would be open. He come in here and grubbed it out with his own hands."

"No reason he should claim land he can't even use." Lane had answered softly. "I got script that allows me to take up a full section. There's a likely place near the spring there north of the creek."

That was the beginning. Fargo Lane had taken his section of land, a square set like an ulcer in the north end of Wolf Creek Valley. He had fenced it in and built his shack, in that order, and in time had a hun-

dred cows. He at least had lain his foundation.

Calvert had waited, saying nothing, molding a false confidence in this upstart who dared defile Lightning C realm.

So Lane had sought out the great man. He had said, "It took all I had to build me a fence. I did it to show you I wasn't aiming to maverick your beef. We can be neighborly without rubbing elbows, I reckon." That was the day he first saw Bessie Grant, Big Les' niece. He hadn't tried to hide what was in his eyes when he stared at her. He was a solitary man with strong likes and dislikes. He liked this girl. "When I want something bad enough I get it," he said, "I been wanting a place of my own for a long time."

Six months ago that, a blunt offer of friendship in the only way Fargo Lane knew to give it; an offer of something more to Bessie Grant. And now Big Les was giving his answer, just as he had answered others who had come too close to Wolf Creek Valley. He had waited until Fargo had his cows bunched for market; he had struck at the right time.

The sound of the riders was faint now, far across the flats up near the corrals and the shack. Fargo mounted and rode that way, holding his horse in, not knowing for sure what he would do, knowing only that this was his land and his home, knowing that no man was big enough to take it from him. He saw the flare of a small fire, then the flame. They had fired the old shed he used as a barn.

By the time he got near enough the two buildings and the corrals were skeletons. Twelve men stood grouped silently, watching the flames as if fascinated. Big Les and Tang Reed were there. Fargo dismounted, dropped to one knee, cradled the rifle in the palm of his hand and fired. A man dropped, silently, grotesquely. There was no touch of emotion in Fargo Lane.

He killed two more before they realized they were perfect targets against the curtain of flame. They broke for cover then, fading swiftly into the outer shadows. There were curses, calls back and forth, then the beat of hoofs. He waited, expecting them to come his way. The crackling of the flames became a cube of noise in a void of black silence. The riders, satisfied with their destruction, had headed toward town.

Now for the first time there was thought, plan and emotion in Lane, and in the tumbling flush of it he lost the touch of reason. That blazing shack became an issue out of all proportion to its intrinsic value. It was not a thing of second rate boards and oil paper windows—it was his home, his dream, his reason for life.

Forcing the horse as close to the flames as he could, he threw himself from the saddle and ran crazily to the pump that lifted the water from the surface well below the spring. He found gunnysacks, soaked them, then ran to the edge of the fire and flailed away like a madman. The mocking flame seared his skin, scorched his eyebrows, curled the hair on his forearms. Sheets of hot ash puffed under the smack of the wet sacks; sparks rocketed as studding buckled and crashed about him. And still he fought, gasping for breath, strangled by smoke, fighting the hopeless fight of a man who refuses to be whipped. And when the dawn came there was only the twisted victory of fire and he was alone, haggard, smoke-stained, still undefeated there in the midst of defeat. He put fresh shells in his rifle and six-shooter. Then, mounting, he rode toward town.

The Lightning C had celebrated that night in the town that crouched in the sand and sage by permission of Big Les Calvert. It was a formless town, a sniveling blot in the vastness of the rangeland that made up Lightning C. It was a town that lived for Big Les, and fawned and catered to his whims. It withdrew like a snail into a shell when it saw Fargo Lane ride up its main street.

Six Lightning C men, blinking against the new sun, weaving some from whiskey, stepped off the porch of a saloon and formed in the street as if to stop him.

Fargo rode in, looking over their heads, and to no one in general he said, "You work for a brand and you take orders. I'll leave it like that. Don't make it personal."

They blinked at the hatless rider who carried a rifle loosely in his right hand. They saw the smudge of burns on his face and hands; they saw more in his bleak, smoke-blue eyes. They moved aside and Lane rode through.

AT A house up the street he dismounted, stuck the rifle in the saddle boot, then pounded the door with a balled fist. A

sleepy voice said, "What the hell you want?"

"You own the lumber yard?" Fargo Lane asked.

"Suppose I do?"

"I got an order to give you."

"I open up at nine o'clock," the voice said. "I'll talk to you then."

"Now," Lane said. His foot came back and landed solidly on the flimsy door panel. Reaching inside, he turned the knob and the door opened. He walked into the room, kicked aside the door that led to the bedroom. A bug-eyed little man in a nightshirt and white night cap sat up in bed, pulling a blanket around his spare middle.

"Get a pencil and paper and write this down," Fargo said. "I don't want you to get mixed up."

The lumber dealer wrote while Fargo dictated. Once or twice Fargo stopped, pursed his lips. "A fourteen by sixteen kitchen and eatin' room," he said, "and I want a bedroom big enough so a woman can fix it up pretty. You figger it out exact and I want the stuff out to my place today."

"That's quite a bill, Mr. Lane," the lumberman said nervously. "In a case like this it's customary to ask for a down payment and—"

"You'll charge that to Big Les Calvert," Fargo said. "Let me know if you have trouble collecting." He turned and left the room, passing through the ruined door. He'd need some wire to repair the broken fence and there had been a dead horse in the burned corral.

The town came to life and he felt it whispering at his heels, saw it keeping under cover. Many times he spotted men he knew, ranchers who kept beyond the valley rim and joked about the power of Big Les. At first he spoke to them, an off-hand greeting, but they turned, pretending not to hear, afraid to admit they knew him. He had been in town an hour before he met Calvert on the street.

Calvert had the physical aspects to go with his power. Four inches taller than Fargo, a half foot broader, he nearly blocked the sidewalk. He had a square-cut, seamed face, a bushy head of hair that refused to stay concealed under his sweat-stained hat. He wore a gun, and his right hand was hooked carelessly in his cartridge belt. He said, "I figured you'd have sense enough to leave, Fargo."

"You figured wrong, Les," Fargo said softly. "It's like a man calling a bluff in a poker game. You can't be right all the time."

"I'm telling you now to get the hell out! I don't allow maverickers squattin' on the edge of my range."

"Couldn't blame you for that," Fargo said. "But I'm not a mavericker and I'm not on your range. I'm rebuilding the house and barn; you'll get the bill. Have your boys round up my cows and bring them back. If there's any missing I'll cut your herd and take my pick, cow for cow. Get out of my way, Les."

The town whispered no longer. It held its breath. Like a guilt-ridden puppy it groveled and inched its way forward, ready to lick the hand of the victor. Big Les Calvert's feet seemed to spread a bit without his body moving. His hand shifted on his gunbelt. He said, "I'm telling you to leave."

"I'm staying," Lane said.

The town sucked in its breath.

No measure of time then. Two hulking, brutal men stood there toe to toe, and in some way known only to themselves they understood each other and appreciated each other's values. The crowd had coiled in a semi-circle. Directly in front and in back of the two men the street was vacant. A movement then, a sudden flash of movement. Tang Reed, the Lightning C foreman, had moved one foot from the line of spectators.

Fargo lunged, and his shoulder caught Big Les in the middle, spilling him off balance. Two guns blazed as one. Reed started walking, out in the open where all could see. He held a smoking six-shooter in his hand. He walked with an odd, jerking step, his head snapping back and forth on his neck. Then the middle of the man was out ahead and his feet lagged, his head still jerked. He fell forward, hitting the ground hard, sending up a spurt of dust. Big Les, on one knee, dropped his hand toward his belt. Fargo Lane, gripping a smoking gun, said softly, "You'd be a fool to go for that, Les."

For a second it seemed as if Big Les would try it. It was no longer a personal fight against a nester on forbidden ground;

it was a test, a call to prove his power. A dozen men whose fear of Big Les held them outside the valley stood here now and watched. Their entire future could depend on the answer to that challenge. This was the thing Big Les knew, and it beaded the sweat on his seamed forehead, put a dryness in his mouth. He held there on one knee, his hand undecided, and he looked into the barrel of Fargo Lane's .44. Slowly the big man got to his feet. He took his hat and whipped the dust from his trouser legs. Then his massive voice bellowed the order: "Lightning C! We're riding."

They rode, and left their dead foreman there in the dust of the street.

A TOWN that had been dead and oppressed throbbed into cock-sure life. It was the gathering of the snake killers after the snake was dead. "Did yuh see 'im eat crow?" a rim rancher chortled. "What I been tellin' you, boys? All bluff, that Big Les."

"Hell, he ain't got no right to keep us out of the valley," another vowed, slapping his hand on the bar. "I say move in and take it over. We've been too long at it!" Fargo Lane drank his whiskey straight and he made no comment. He was thinking of a new house with a bedroom big enough that a woman could make it fussy if she had a mind to.

But the town flexed it strength and the false fronts of the stores hunched their shoulders and muscled aside the stars in the blue-black night. Men drank and men cursed, the loud-mouthed ill-chosen curses of men whetting an edge on a long dulled courage. "*Big Les has run a bluff long enough.*" It became a marching song and through the bars of its music opportunists wove strands of hemp and some talked of fire. Lean, work-hardened waists felt the unfamiliar sag of gunbelts, and it was then Fargo Lane realized that his name was the barb on the spear point of vengeance.

He had ordered wire, had charged it to Big Les. He had bought new dishes and bedding, too, fancy bedding like a woman wants. He had picked out furniture to replace the apple boxes and plank table set on saw bucks. These items he had arranged to pay for himself, saying, "Don't tell me my credit ain't good. You got my word I'll pay, and my word is all you need."

The furniture dealer scratched his nose vigorously and wrote up the order.

But now they were calling his name, asking his advice. They slapped him on the back and bought him free drinks and finally his thinking took a pattern and he put down his glass. He said slowly, "Your ranches are out there," jerking his thumb, "outside the valley. Stay on 'em."

They took it as a joke, men looking for something clever in each word of a hero. "Stay out, he says. Stay out like Fargo Lane stays out, I say! Hell, men, there's a dozen of us and a dozen more who'll ride. Four-bits says when Big Les sees Lane ridin' in at the head of an army he'll tuck his tail and run."

"It could be," Lane said softly. "But he won't see it."

"You aim to finish him off like you did Tang Reed?"

"I aim to see the likes of you stay out of the valley."

No joke, this. Nothing on which they could hang the velvet drape of hero worship. Some men held a shot glass a long moment, then drank it fast. Some rolled their tongues against the inside of lips and did not blink their eyes. One had trouble making a cigarette. The one who kept coiling and uncoiling the rope said, "Maybe you better put that plain, Fargo."

"I'll do that," Lane said. He sucked the smoky saloon air into his lungs. It crawled to each recess, expanding his chest and squaring his shoulders. He looked at these men and felt no malice, no more than he did toward the Lightning C crew. There had never been such a thing as diplomacy and planning in Fargo Lane's life. A man was this or a man was that, and you made up your mind and said what you thought. He said flatly, "You'll ruin the valley. There's not a smart cowman among you."

They didn't take that well. This man was an upstart—a cocklebur spread with a hundred cows. One section of land, and out there on the rim some of these men measured land in miles, ranches nearly as big in scope as the Lightning C. The one with the rope said, "Maybe you plan on keeping it all for yourself."

"If I did that would be my business," Fargo Lane said. "It happens I don't. The valley is too big for one man, too small for more than two. That leaves me and Big

Les Calvert. It could have been any one of you if you'd had the guts to take it. Some of you were here before Big Les, but you didn't like the color of Indian feathers. Since then there hasn't been one with the guts to be neighbors to a man like Big Les. The valley's settled now. There'll be no room for land-grabbers and squatters. You'd graze it off and you'd kill it, and than you'd whine for more land. Get back where you belong and stay there." He paid for his own drink then, downed it and went out into the night.'

But he hadn't reckoned with the tonic of courage that he himself had fed them. A liquid fire in the atrophied veins of men, it snowballed and grew, nurtured carefully by the fuel of the mob. "The hell with him!" they shouted. "It's a put-up job between him and Big Les. They're askin' for war and, by God, they'll get it!" In an hour there was not a horse left in the town stables.

RIDING alone back toward the blackened rubble of his cabin Fargo Lane felt it touch him and the lines of his face drew tight and deep. A slow-thinking man, in a way, he had thought little of telling the rim ranchers to stay out of the valley. But now with the whisper of night on his back and the star spears stockading across the stage-studded plain, a man could see values that were fogged in a noise thick room. He remembered the man with the coil of rope, remembered how men had changed in a day.

It was like a bull he had known once on a range farther south. A massive hulking brute, thick-witted and dumb. Seeing a man on horseback, the beast would paw and snort, then retreat. Until one day it saw a man on foot. For a long time its bloodshot eyes had rolled, the saliva had dripped in strings from its mouth. And at last it had decided and it had charged. The bull killed a man that day, and then, finding its strength, finding that man was nothing to fear, it had turned on mounted men. Fargo felt a prickle of cold that wasn't there touch the center of his back. He remembered how it looked, seeing a horse gored by a bull.

The willow-rimmed creek made a soft turn here and the trail forked, one leading north to the spring, the other bearing south the span of miles to the Lightning C headquarters. In the flatness of the land and the crispness of the black night the lights of the Lightning C were clear, winking with distance. In back of him was the town and the men who made up the town. He turned the horse quickly and took the trail toward the Lightning C.

A lone hound set up a baleful mourning as Lane rode into the cottonwood fringe of the ranch. In the bunkhouse a light blinked on and at the main house a door opened and the hulking figure of Big Les blocked the illumined square. He called to the dog and the loose-jowled brute came whimpering to his feet. The sound of Fargo's horse and the creak of leather was clear above the suddenly stilled chirp of the crickets. Big Les stepped out of the door light and called a question.

"Fargo Lane. My hands are in sight. I want to talk to you."

"Keep the hell back, Lane. I got a shotgun here."

There was dead silence and in it the *clop* of hoofbeats steadily approached. Fargo's

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horse came into the dim fan of light, stopped there. "Put down the shotgun, Les," Fargo said softly. "There's talk in town of coming after you. I figured you might need help."

"Not from you. Get the hell off my place or reach for that gun!"

Fargo looped the reins around the saddle horn, saw the nose of the shotgun come around the lintel of the door. He hesitated a second, watching the gun, then he swung his leg and dismounted. He hooked a stirrup up and loosened the cinch and with his face toward the horse's side said. "They mean it, Les. They read it wrong, that doings between you and me. They figure they can back you down."

He heard a quick muttering from the doorway, movement at the bunkhouse. He stood there then, his hands well out from his sides. Behind him he knew Lightning C men were moving up. He knew that they would have guns. He started walking toward that shotgun in the door. Calvert said. "Stand back, Fargo. I don't want to kill you."

He kept walking, his hands wide, planting each step firmly. "I come peaceful," he said.

He knew this man as well as he knew himself, now, and he knew that as long as he did not waver he would be all right. There in town this morning he had shown Calvert that he was a man of his word, a man worthy of claiming land in Wolf Creek Valley. If he hesitated now, if he pleaded, it might trip the scale, might indicate to Big Les that Fargo Lane was not the man he had thought him to be. He was within six feet of the end of the shotgun barrel. The gun moved, and he saw Bessie Grant standing there in the door, directly in front of him. Her position would stop those behind him from firing. He tipped his hat and said, "Thank you, ma'am. I was wantin' to talk to your uncle."

SHE said nothing, but it was as if she had answered the thousand dreams that had been in his mind since the first day he had seen her. She had a wrapper drawn tightly around her slim waist. She stood only to his shoulders. The light, fanning behind her, laid a halo through her black hair, tumbled loosely around her shoulders. Her eyes, deep blue as he remembered, seemed black now devoid of direct light as they were. It was not until the color came to her neck and then her cheeks that Fargo realized he had been staring at her and he knew that again he had not kept his thoughts out of his eyes. She stepped aside to let him in and he removed his hat.

Big Les stood there, the shotgun gripped in his huge hands. A big man; a man who had lived a lot and seen a lot. His eyes barely touched the face of his niece and then he looked a long time at Fargo Lane. He said, "It took guts doing what you did."

"Not with a neighbor," Lane said.

He spoke slowly then, deliberately. "I didn't reckon they'd have the gumption to go through with it after I told them how it was, just room enough for you and me here in the valley. They're a cussed lot, wantin' something for nothing. They'll be here, trying to drive you out. Comin' alone as I did I got maybe a half hour start."

"I don't have to trust you, Fargo."

"You will, though."

Big Les went to the door and called to the men. They came in at once, half dressed, some of them, each with a gun. He sent them back to the bunkhouse for private rifles. Then he went to a storeroom and broke out ammunition. Seeing Big Les straining against the new wood of a box lid Fargo came and laid a chock to give the hammer more leverage. For a second the two men looked at each other, then Calvert grunted as the nails pulled free. They went back in the front room and Bessie came in with coffee and two cups.

Fargo said, "I'd admire a lot to have coffee with you, ma'am." He looked straight at her.

The girl met his direct gaze, not smiling, not afraid. Rather it was more of open fascination that was in her eyes. She left the room and came back with a third cup. She sat on the settee and made room for him beside her.

The attackers came in the pre-dawn, a shouting, whiskey-fortified mob riding four abreast. From their yells Fargo gathered they had wasted their time cutting fence and running cows by twos and threes. A slant on the way they'd do things if they owned the valley, Fargo thought. He kept still, letting Calvert make the challenge.

"Turn back before somebody gets hurt," the big man called. "I've told you to stay out and I've meant it. There'll be trouble if

you don't turn back—damned bad trouble!"

For an answer half the mob turned toward the barn. Matches flickered in unsteady hands. "They mean it," Big Les said. "Break it up." A dozen rifles cracked inside the room and the flares of light disappeared. There was the sudden rearing of horses, the shock of curses, the running of feet. Glass tinkled from the windows of the main house as the raiders made scattered reply. Once more Calvert called into the night, "Don't push it further."

But the mob lust was there now, touched off by the flash of riflefire, the promise of the match flicker there by the barn of dry hay. They hesitated and from somewhere in their midst they found the one thing they lacked—a leader. There was a shouted command, then a volley of riflefire. After that a quick deploying of men, a single pistol shot and a crash of lead from a dozen vantage points. Calvert levered his rifle, his face grim.

It was war now, Fargo knew. War spawned by men who saw nothing but oppression in the acts of one man who had dared to grow big. Those men out there had had every chance that Big Les had had. They had passed it by, waiting for another to break the way, grow big on the land. And now they were clamoring for their rights and whining that it was wrong that one man should have so much. Carrion crows gathered to pick the carcass of a fallen giant. A bullet splintered the windowsill, and cut a gash in Fargo's cheek. He fired back, aiming as the rifle flashed. He was hardly aware that she had come to his side and was pressing a handkerchief into his wound.

Later he saw her take a rifle, knock a pane of glass from a window and fire into the gathering daylight. Once more she was by his side and without knowing he did it he reached out and took her hand and squeezed it tightly. He looked up then and saw Big Les watching them.

The daylight was their ally, and with its coming the rim ranchers and town hangers-on began casting anxiously for means of escape. They made one half-hearted rally, but the drive of whiskey was gone and the words that had been brilliant under the warmth of kerosene lamps became empty and gray in the cold dawn. Seeing he had them on the run, Calvert made his offer.

"Throw down your guns and ride off peaceful and we'll let you go. There's work to be done on your own places. Go do it and leave us to ours."

They could hear the hurried consultations, the agreement, the disagreement, the proposals and counter-proposals. But at last one man tossed a rifle out into the open and others followed. In time the man who had coiled the rope the night before came out from behind a shed. He had his hands shoulder high. "My horse is dead, Les," he called. "Could I borrow one?"

"Help yourself, all of you," Big Les said. "I'll pick 'em up later. Don't stop ridin' until you're well out of the valley."

And now it was awkward, gray and cold there in the big room and Lane was anxious to be about his chores. "I got a load of lumber comin' out this morning," he explained to Calvert. "Like I said, you'll be gettin' the bill."

"I'll pay for a one-room cabin," the big man said flatly. "If there's more it'll be on your own."

Fargo thought that over for some time and then said, "That'll be fair."

He looked at Bessie again and now he found it hard to meet her eyes and he couldn't tell why. He wanted to tell her that there would be more than one room. He would like her to know about the big kitchen and the bedroom that could be fixed up. He said, "Good bye, ma'am. I'll see you later."

She didn't really say anything, but the way she tilted her head, the way her lips parted, pursed ever so slightly . . . It was as though she had whispered, "Soon—please—soon." Fargo felt a buzzing in his ears.

He had mounted his horse and was ready to leave when Calvert came and stood by him, his hand fiddling with the stirrup leather. The big man said, "It'll be lonesome for me here alone, after Bessie is gone."

Fargo didn't hesitate with his answer, "We'll drop by to see you now and then, me and Bessie," he said.

"Do that for sure," Les Calvert said. He spat over his chin and went back to the house.

DUGGAN TROUBLE

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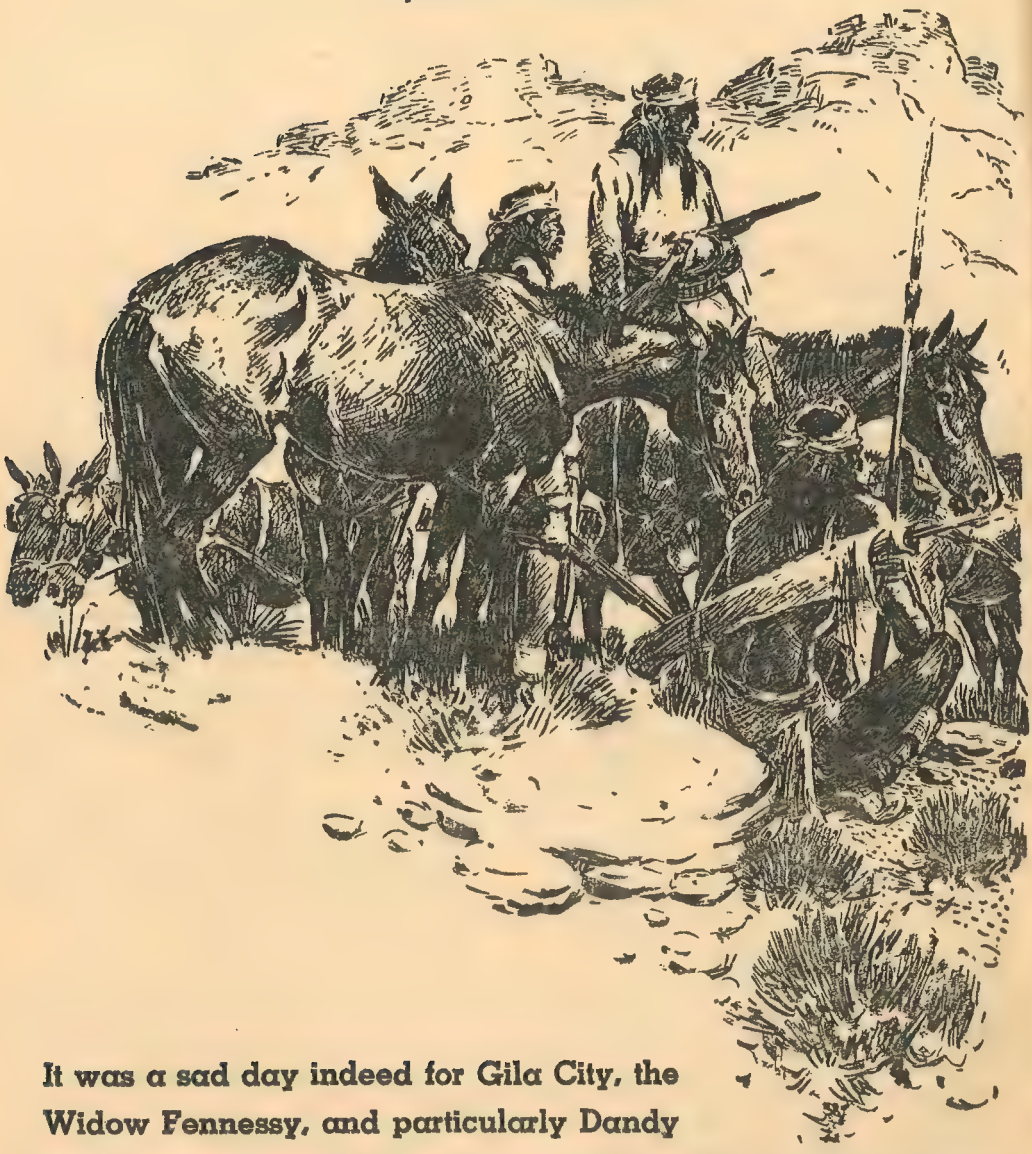
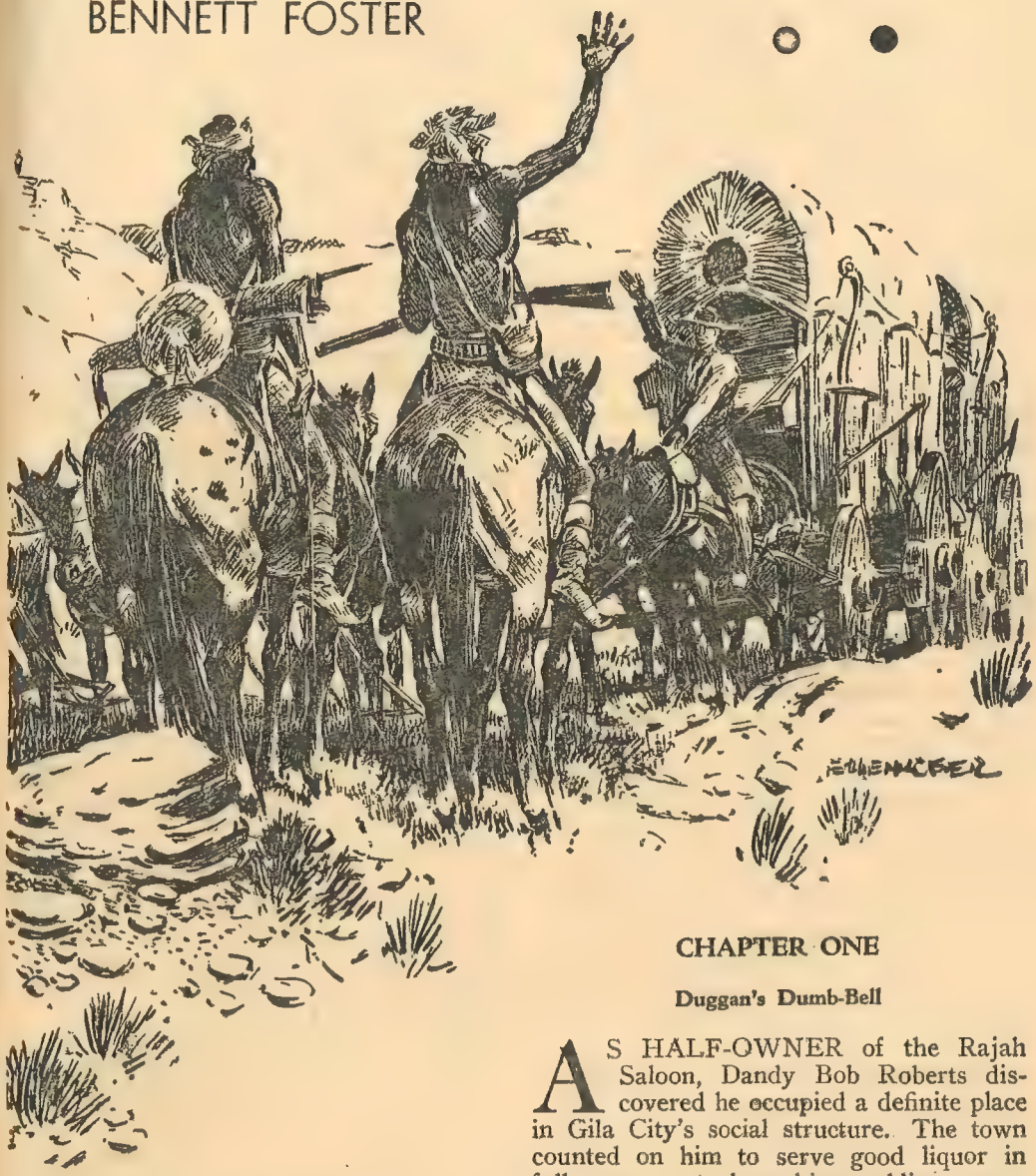


It was a sad day indeed for Gila City, the Widow Fennessy, and particularly Dandy Bob Roberts, when old man Duggan rode off on his one-man campaign against Oso Rojo's raiding Apaches—backed by a war chest of ten solid bucks and two fluid pints!

AT SALADO WASH

By
BENNETT FOSTER



Dandy Bob, on the lead wagon, checked the team

CHAPTER ONE

Duggan's Dumb-Bell

AS HALF-OWNER of the Rajah Saloon, Dandy Bob Roberts discovered he occupied a definite place in Gila City's social structure. The town counted on him to serve good liquor in full measure, to keep his gambling games honest, to watch his bartenders and see they didn't short-change drunks, and to be responsible for old man Duggan. All this was foreign to Bob's habits of thought and action. He had spent his life in figuring

angles and taking advantage of the same, so honesty came hard. It was harder still to look after Duggan. That amiable drunkard considered the whole world legitimate prey, and his whiskey-soaked brain could conjure up ideas that appalled even Dandy Bob. Still, Bob Roberts tried. Credit must be given him: he tried.

"Look here, Duggan," Bob ordered after they had operated the Rajah for a month. "We own this joint an' we've got to keep it respectable. A saloonkeeper can't get a man drunk an' then roll him in the alley. Give me that blackjack you've been carryin'."

Duggan searched his partner's face and saw that Dandy Bob meant what he said. In the past the two had committed various acts of chicanery and the old man could hardly believe his ears. To have Dandy Bob suddenly turn pure was no more surprising than to find Satan backstopping for the Angel Gabriel. Hastily, to settle his nerves, Duggan took a big drink of Chapman & Gore.

"But Bob—" he expostulated.

"Give it to me or I'll tell the Widow Fennessy," Bob commanded sternly.

Violet Fennessy—the Widow Fennessy—was owner of the Limerick Girl silver mine and Duggan's affianced. To Duggan she represented life without labor—and he was afraid of losing her. At the moment Duggan was on probation with the widow, and Dandy Bob could have thought of no more potent threat. Reluctantly the old man passed over the blackjack.

"How long are we goin' to do this lily white act?" Duggan grumbled as Dandy Bob pocketed the weapon. "I'm gettin' tired of goin' around with my face all screwed up like I was a preacher. What's the matter with you, Bob? You ain't yourself no more."

This was true, although Roberts failed to realize it. One month of rectitude, of being a respectable citizen, had done things to Bob. He always had commanded a certain prestige—his sartorial splendor and his ability with a .45 Colt insured him that—but now, as he conducted his business along strictly legitimate lines, he began to enter a different stage. Although Bob was entirely unaware of it, the solid and substantial citizens of his bailiwick regarded him and his opinions with respect.

"I'm just as much myself as I ever was," he assured Duggan. "An' we're goin' to be honest until the right deal comes along. I ain't goin' to throw the Rajah away for peanuts, but when the chance comes for a real killin', I'll take it. I think we might make a nice profit."

Bob Roberts thought that this was so. He believed what he said. Duggan also believed it and was satisfied. Neither of them realized that habit is a subtle thing and that customs of honesty may become ingrained.

So, beginning with the acquisition of the Rajah Saloon, Dandy Bob Roberts walked the path of rectitude and responsibility, with Duggan, in a manner of speaking, stalking in his shadow. Gila City watched, skeptically at first and then accepted the change. The attitude of Gila City was expressed by tough old Jim Conway, owner of the 77 brand.

"Bob Roberts," said Conway, in from his ranch and foregathered with solid citizens in the Rajah, "has done changed his spots. He used to be a wild one. Time was when I figured he maybe stole a few cattle from me, but maybe I was wrong. He's makin' a go of this saloon an' he's holdin' ol' man Duggan in line. Looks like he turned into a pretty good man."

Solemn nods agreed with Conway. Mentally, the group recapitulated those episodes in which Bob Roberts had played a part: the shooting scrapes with Dick Harmes and Bliss Cassidy, the expedition to Freedom Hill in which, despite Apaches, Bob and Duggan had delivered the Christmas mail; the discovery of the lost vein in the Limerick Girl and the restoration of the mine to Violet Fennessy. All those things Bob Roberts had done, albeit unwillingly and unwittingly.

"Yeah," Frazee, the postmaster, seconded Conway, "Bob's all right. You know, he might not be a bad man to run for mayor next fall."

Again the solemn nods ran around the circle. So, six months after his acquisition of the Rajah, Bob Roberts was respected, and not alone for his ability to shoot. This might have continued indefinitely except for old man Duggan. Old man Duggan believed that Bob was only waiting for a killing, and honesty palled upon him. He forced the issue.

THERE were two freighting outfits in Gila City, each with its own wagon yard. One of these was operated in conjunction with the Star Livery barn, which was also the stage stop. The other was owned by Ladd Quentin and Wilsey Lea. Quentin and Lea had established their business shortly after Bob and Duggan acquired the Rajah Saloon. Quentin was as tall as Dandy Bob and, like Bob, affected the clothing of a gambler: broadcloth coat, broad black hat, immaculate linen and shiny boots. From a distance the similarity between the two was striking and it was only at close range that differences could be noted.

Wilsey Lea was a small, hard-bitten man who paid little attention to dress. His eyes were small, blue and mean, but his voice was low and soft. Gila City sized Wilsey Lea up as a hard case; his partner also.

Quentin and Lea did custom hauling. They pulled freight to the mines, they hauled from Tucson, they took the small jobs, the left-overs—and they made a living. Both were gamblers, shrewd players at poker, faro and monte, and both were horsemen.

Old man Duggan also fancied himself as a connoisseur of horseflesh. Among the other appurtenances of Bliss Cassidy, inherited with the Rajah Saloon, was a horse known as Dumb-bell. Dumb-bell showed breeding and a turn of speed. Dumb-bell had beaten everything on four legs around Gila City. Duggan boasted and bragged about Dumb-bell as fluently as he lied concerning his own prowess against the Apaches. Naturally Wilsey Lea and Ladd Quentin heard and listened to these lies.

In the Lea and Quentin stable was a hammer-headed, raw-boned, roan horse, and prior to their advent in Gila City the roan had made a living for the partners. Quentin and Lea foregathered and talked things over.

"Yeah," Ladd Quentin said at the end of the consultation, "but not while Bob Roberts is in town. He'd get wise. Wait till he pulls out an' then we'll spring it." So the partners bided their time.

Summer drew to a close and fall approached. The Widow Fennessy took Duggan off the probation list and set a date for the wedding. Dandy Bob Roberts decided to visit Tucson and see the liquor wholesalers. He needed a bust, needed relief from the steady pattern of rectitude. The widow decided that she, too, would visit the metropolis and order her wedding finery. Bob and the widow departed for the Old Pueblo on the stage. Wilsey Lea and Ladd Quentin saw them go and exchanged significant glances.

Tucson received her visitors with aplomb and pleasure. The widow foregathered with the town's most fashionable dressmaker. Bob sought his old companions. Tucson was familiar to him; twice a year he visited the place. His friends greeted him joyously, but it was different from former occasions. Whereas, before, he had been a gambler, a sharpshooter in town for a good time, now he was a respected businessman whose opinions and counsel were sought. There was a constraint upon him and, unbelievably, he found this pleasant. He drank a little and he played a little poker but it was for amusement only.

On his fourth day in town he sat into a game with Bert Sughman, down from Prescott and an old acquaintance. Talk around the table was desultory and, in some manner, the names of Quentin and Lea were mentioned. Sughman, who was shuffling the deck, paused in his endeavor and looked up.

"Them two," Sughman said. "A little man that looks like a hard case an' a big man that dresses like a gambler? I know 'em." He passed the deck for a cut, retrieved it and began the deal.

"They were in Prescott a year ago," Sughman said, "an' they took the camp. Cabbaged on to all the loose cash the boys had. Done it with a horse." He continued, describing the operations of Lea and Quentin in Prescott, and as he talked, a faint, uneasy feeling began to grow in the pit of Bob Roberts' belly.

"It was the old get-drunk-an'-bet business," Sughman said. "Lea acted like he was full an' bragged about this roan. The roan didn't look like he could run a stroke. They tolled us on, let us win a race, an' then when the real money was bet, that roan horse just breezed in. We asked for it but it come hard. Them two are smooth operators."

Sughman picked up his cards and scanned them. Bob Roberts, the faint feeling growing, folded his hand and pushed it

to the center of the table. "Cash me in," he requested. "I just thought of somethin'."

The Widow Fennessy was not nearly done with her dressmaking, so Bob returned to Gila City alone. He rode the top of the stage because progress seemed swifter from that vantage point. Twice during the trip, signal smokes were seen from the hills, thin pillars of rising vapor, now white, now black. Driver and guard spoke feelingly of these, forecasting trouble from Apaches, but Bob hardly heard their comments. When he reached Gila City the town appeared deserted; only the hostlers were on hand to meet the stage.

"Where is everybody?" Bob demanded.

"Out on the flat north of town," a hostler answered. "Horse race out there."

Bob waited for no more. He left his grip at the stage stop and hurried.

GILA CITY was assembled on the flat; all the town was there. Bob pushed through the crowd, searching for old man Duggan. He found him, together with Watson, the assayer, Frazee, Stevens of the Holy Ghost mine, and Ladd Quentin.

Duggan was jubilant. "Jest in time, Bob," the old man chortled. "In another ten minutes you're goin' to be a wealthy man." Duggan's breath was heavy with Chapman & Gore perfume.

"What's the score?" Bob asked. He spoke to Duggan but his eyes were on Quentin.

Quentin smiled thinly. "Your pardner matched a race with Lea an' me," he said easily. "Runnin' your Dumb-bell horse against a nag of ours. We got a little bet on it."

Watson said, "They want me to hold stakes, Bob. Duggan here, wants to bet the Rajah against Quentin and Lea's wagon yard. I didn't know—"

"That's the bet," Quentin interposed smoothly. "It ain't a question of wantin' to make it. It's already been made. Ain't that right, Frazee?"

Jim Frazee nodded reluctantly. "I was in the Rajah when Duggan made it," he said. "But look here. Duggan only owns half the saloon. If Bob don't want to bet his half—"

"Of course, if Roberts wants to back out," Quentin interrupted, "I won't say a word." There was scorn and a question in his voice. Men had gathered around and were listenin'.

Duggan opened his mouth to speak, closed it again as Bob made answer. "Who have you got to ride Dumb-bell?" he asked.

"Apolonius Garcia," Duggan answered. "Lookit here, Bob. I figure that—"

"I know how you figure," Bob snapped. His eyes met Quentin's. A dead game sport, Bob Roberts. "All right, Quentin. Run your race. I'll back my pardner's bet."

Quentin grinned thinly, for he was over the hump. Bob Roberts was a gambling man who would not welch. "Here's a deed to the wagon yard," Quentin said, and pushed a paper at Watson.

"I got a deed to the Rajah made out," Duggan crowed. "I made my mark on it. You sign it, Bob."

"Give it here," said Bob Roberts, "an' give me a pencil." He scrawled his name below the cross Duggan had made and passed the deed to Watson. "Now," he continued grimly, "let's run the race."

Preliminaries were attended to, a starter selected, judges picked. Bob and Duggan put Apolonius up on Dumb-bell. Wilsey, stripped down to shirt and trousers, rode the roan. Duggan chattered blithely, certain of victory. Bob was grimly silent. Not until the horses lined up did the old man notice his partner's lack of enthusiasm.

"What's the matter, Bob?" Duggan demanded. "Lookit. I spent all the time you was gone linin' this thing up. Them fellers ain't got a chance. Why, Dumb-bell c'n outrun his shadder, you know that! That roan horse—"

"Will beat Dumb-bell thirty feet!" Bob snapped. "The roan's a ringer!"

Duggan's eyes widened with astonishment. "Then why'd you bet?" he demanded. "Why didn't you back out?"

"An' welch?" Dandy Bob snarled. "Not me!"

Bystanders stared curiously, then talk ceased abruptly as a shot sounded. The two horses, bay and roan, came pounding down the course. Along the track each man leaned forward. The bay had a lead, a trifling lead. The bay horse was ahead. The bay horse. . . .

The roan stretched his hammer head. Wilsey Lea lay along the roan's neck and Wilsey's whip fell. The roan's belly flattened to the ground. Up to the bay, even

with the bay, ahead of the bay. The roan horse fairly flew. Now there was a gap between the horses. They thundered across the finish.

Old man Duggan straightened up, his face gray as his beard. Old man Duggan found his voice. "Bob," he gasped, "we're paupers!"

CHAPTER TWO

Gun Chore for a Pauper

ONE WEEK after the race Dandy Bob Roberts sat in his adobe at the edge of Gila City and looked at old man Duggan. Duggan snored on a bed. Certain of Bob's friends had suggested that he kill the old man, and Bob had been tempted. Duggan himself had suggested that Bob kill Quentin and Lea. He had also suggested various other enterprises, ranging from stealing cattle to holding up the stage. Bob looked at old man Duggan and wondered why he had not taken the suggestions. Here he was, right back in the position he had occupied before owning the Rajah, and he wasn't stirring a hand. He had played some poker, honestly, and won a little money, but then he had always been honest at poker. He had listened to Duggan's suggestions—and had shaken his head.

He couldn't steal cattle, not when old Jim Conway had come around and gruffly suggested that, in case Bob needed a little money, he, Conway, had some cash to spare. He couldn't high-grade ore from the Holy Ghost. Not when Stevens, the manager, had diffidently offered Bob a job "just to tide him over until something came up." He couldn't put his heart into holding up a stage, not when the division manager had offered him a job as shotgun guard. All the common aspects of dishonesty were closed to Dandy Bob Roberts. He looked at Duggan and scowled.

Duggan snored peacefully. For one day Duggan had filled with wild self-recrimination, also with Chapman & Gore. At the end of that time the old man bounced back with a plan to steal the roan and use the horse to make money. On the second day the Widow Fennessy had returned to Gila City, heard the news and summoned Bob into executive council. Duggan was back on the blacklist, in the doghouse as usual, but Violet Fennessy had placed the whole Limerick Girl at Bob's disposal. Dandy Bob shuddered slightly. The Widow Fennessy wanted to get married. She would take old man Duggan if she could get nothing better, but she was in the market and looking around. Bob knew that he was on her shopping list. Violet and Duggan, he thought, would make an ideal pair and he wished that they were safely married. He also wished that the old, familiar twist would come to him. Here he was, practically broke, and he couldn't figure an angle. Not a solitary thing. It was tough. He had been honest too long. He picked up his hat, arose, adjusted gun and belt under the tails of his Prince Albert and walked out. It was noon and time to eat.

Lunch was postponed. Gila City boiled with excitement and Bob joined the crowd at the stage station. The stage had just come in, filled with bullet holes and plentifully sprinkled with iron arrow points. The Apaches were out. Geronimo was raiding along the Border.

Arizona Territory knew all about

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Apaches, knowledge gained the hard way. Apaches were a daily hazard, like falling into mine shafts or being thrown by a bronc; but this was no ordinary, every-day affair, as it developed. In the days that followed, Gila City, as well as the rest of Arizona, learned that fact. The Tonto tribe was off the reservation, the Mimbres and Chiricahuas were raiding, the whole Apache nation was on the warpath. From Lordsburg in New Mexico to Yuma on the river, men walked warily and waited for the Army to get busy.

The Army got busy. From Bowie and Grant and all the posts located for just such contingencies, the troops moved out, and with the troops moved Pima scouts and others from the White Mountain Apaches, glad to take Government rations and pay while playing the old game of war. They moved, and moved again, but it was like chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. Apaches disappeared into Mexico where they rested and recruited before returning to the fray. Weary cavalrymen rode and swore and rode again, and even their wily foe disappeared when contact was made. Ruined ranches smoked in Sulfur Springs Valley, at Dos Cabezas and Tres Hermanas. Lonely prospectors awoke to the warwhoop and died before their own shrieks sounded. The stage ran only at intervals, and then with an escort. But the stage brought mail and rumor.

Rumor. An ugly thing. A prospector, hard wounded, had reached Tucson, and before he died he told a story of new repeating rifles in the hands of his attackers. A ranchman reached Prescott with the same tale. Someone, someone in Arizona or New Mexico Territory, was doing business with the savages. Somewhere, in Tucson or Lordsburg, in Nogales or Phoenix or maybe Gila City, were men—no, not men, two legged vultures—to whom a dollar loomed bigger than human life. Arizona Territory cursed. If we get our hands on them it's a rope, that's all. A rope! But who could it be? You, maybe? Or you? Or you? Arizona forted up, moved only when it had to move, and watched.

IN GILA CITY, disaster struck. A wagon train out from Tucson, belonging to the Gila City Star Delivery, was jumped on Dixon Flat. The wagons, loaded with food, liquor and other essentials, were looted and burned.

In Gila City, Tom Grady who owned the Mint Saloon, and Adolf Britenback of the Tivoli, and Delfino Dominguez, who operated the Cantina, came to call upon Dandy Bob Roberts.

"We got a little proposition to make to you, Bob," said Grady, spokesman for the trio. "We talked it over amongst us an' we got a job. We think you can do it."

Dandy Bob sat on the edge of his bed. His callers occupied chairs. "Go ahead," Bob directed.

"We're runnin' out of liquor," Grady stated. "I'm down to two barrels an' some bottle stuff. Adolf ain't no better off, an' all 'Fino's got left is straight mescal. We want you to bring us some liquor from Tucson."

"What about Quentin an' Lea's outfit?" Bob asked. "They been makin' trips."

Grady shook his head. "They won't haul for us," he answered. "I talked to Quentin. He says there's no point in him furnishin' liquor to competitors. He says when we run out an' want a drink we can buy it at the Rajah."

Bob nodded understanding. Quentin was a sharp one, all right, and so was Lea.

"So we want you to go to Tucson an' bring out two loads." Grady consulted the others with his eyes and Adolf and Delfino nodded agreement. "We got what we need figured out. We trust you—an' you're known in Tucson. You slide up there, just however you can, buy mules an' wagons an' hire men, an' we'll give you an order on the wholesale house. You bring the liquor back."

"Why me?" Bob drawled. "Why not one of you?"

"Because," Grady said frankly, "you're a fightin' man. We ain't."

There was a long silence while Bob thought. "What do I get?" he asked.

"We thought maybe the wagons an' mules," Grady answered. "You'd be set up in the freightin' business then."

Again silence. Then: "Get your letters written an' the money together," Bob Roberts directed. "I'll pull out toinght. An' keep it quiet. No need to talk."

"We won't talk," Grady promised, "an' we'll have everything ready. We're glad you're goin', Bob."

The three saloonmen left and Dandy Bob sat on his bed, studying the empty doorway. Presently he got up and began his preparations, taking his rifle from the rack by the door and carrying it, with rod and oil and patches, to the table. While he was engaged upon the gun old man Duggan came in.

"Bunch of soldiers just hit town," Duggan announced. "Camped down below the creek. They're plumb wore out. Them horses are drawed up till they're snipe-gutted. I seen—What you doin', Bob?"

"Cleaning my gun," Bob answered.

"Yeah, I can see that. I seen that lieutenant that bosses the soldiers, an' talked to him. Tol' him if he really wanted to git him some 'Paches, I'd take him out an' show him how to do it."

"Yeah?" Bob squinted through the rifle barrel, lowered the piece and closed the action.

"Yeah. Say, Bob, you got any money? I'm broke."

Bob Roberts drew three silver dollars from his pocket. "Jus' a loan," Duggan said automatically, and took the money. "I'm goin' back downtown. So long, Bob. See you later." Duggan departed.

Dandy Bob, his preparations complete, left the adobe. In the Mint Saloon he took a drink and then foregathered with Tom Grady. Money and a letter passed between them, Bob pocketing both. He ate supper at the Elite, bowed and spoke to the Widow Fennessy on the street and returned to his adobe through the gathering dusk.

Down in the Rajah Saloon, with Ladd Quentin standing by, old man Duggan waved a whiskey glass, hiccoughed slightly and held forth.

" 'Paches? Why, say, I was fightin' 'Paches before you fellers was out of three-cornered pants. Why, me an' my pardner, Bob Roberts, don't think no more of fightin' 'Paches than we do of takin' a drink."

Quentin nodded to the bartender, who replenished Duggan's glass. "Tell us about the time you and Roberts took the mail to Freedom Hill," Quentin directed, winking at the by-standers. "How many Apaches were in that bunch, Duggan? Fifty?"

"Fifty?" Duggan glared around the sober-faced circle. "They was a hundred anyhow! Aw right, I'll tell you. Me an' Bob. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Old Man Duggan Rides

IN THE MORNING Duggan wakened with a familiar headache. He groped for a bottle, found none and sat up in bed. He was, he saw, in Bob Roberts' adobe house, which was as it should have been, but he had no recollection of coming home. This did not trouble him for he seldom remembered coming home. What did bother him was the empty bed across the room. Bob was gone. Duggan got up, made a sketchy toilet, searched for a bottle and failed to find one. There was still a silver dollar remaining in his pocket, enough for one drink and breakfast, or for two drinks. Duggan hastened toward town.

In the Mint Saloon he took two drinks and sought to promote another. Grady was not at his place of business and the bartender was adamant. Duggan left the saloon. On the street, half way between the Mint and the Rajah, he encountered Violet Fennessy. Although not exactly in the widow's good graces, Duggan stopped. He knew Violet would not give him drinking money, but she might be wheedled into a meal if Duggan worked it right. He commented on the widow's gown and offered to carry her basket to the store, and Violet Fennessy unbent a trifle.

Duggan was in possession of the basket when Tom Grady arrived.

"Mornin', Mrs. Fennessy," Grady greeted. Then, to Duggan: "Did Bob get away all right?"

"He ain't home," Duggan answered. "What do you mean, get away? Where's Bob goin'?"

"I thought he might have told you," Grady said. "Bob's gone to Tucson to bring back some liquor for 'Dolf an' Delfino an' me. If he ain't at the house he must of pulled out last night." Grady walked on to the Mint and Duggan and the Widow Fennessy entered the Bon Ton store, where the basket was filled.

Back at the widow's cottage, Duggan unloaded the basket on the kitchen table while Violet made coffee. There was gingerbread, a weakness of Duggan's, and he ate and drank. The widow was moody and quiet.

"What's the matter, Vi'let?" Duggan

inquired. He still wondered about Roberts.

"I'm worried about Bob," the widow answered. "Goin' to Tucson all alone an' all thim Apaches rampagin' an' lootin' over the country. I don't like it."

"Bob should of took me with him," Duggan affirmed. "Him an' me c'n whup any bunch of 'Paches in the country." An idea struck his fertile mind. "If I jest had some money to buy ca'tridges, I'd ketch up to him," Duggan continued. "If I had ten dollars, I'd sure go an' ketch up."

The widow considered this statement, suddenly turned her back and, with a rustling of petticoats, made a withdrawal from the bank. "Here," she said, turning. "Here's ten dollars. You get your gun an' go find Bob." The widow had a weakness for Roberts and, of all Gila City, she alone placed some small confidence in Aloysius Duggan.

Duggan took the money, gulped the last of the gingerbread and coffee, and started for the door.

"An' if I hear that you drunk up that money," the widow called after him, "you'll wish you'd found the Apaches!"

To give Duggan credit, he had, when he left the Fennessy cottage, some small idea of going to seek Bob Roberts. Duggan, as nearly as he was fond of anyone, was fond of Bob. He carried this idea through to the extent of saddling a horse and securing his shotgun but, after that, determination failed. The horse, shotgun looped to the saddle, was tied to the Mint hitchrail and Duggan went in. He bought a pint, bought another in case the first would not suffice for a long trip, and then, hating to open the pints, bought several drinks. Some two hours later, Jim Frazee, entering the Mint, saw Duggan at the bar.

"I saw the Widow Fennessy down the street," Frazee announced. "She's lookin' for you, Duggan."

"Good God!" Duggan paused not upon the order of his going. He hastened from the Mint Saloon. The horse was still at the hitchrail and, with some hazy recollection that he was to ride somewhere, Duggan took the horse's reins and mounted. The pints clinked companionably in his pocket. Town, with Violet Fennessy looking for him, was not safe. Duggan headed out.

An hour and half-a-pint later Duggan reached the seclusion of a cutbank. The bank offered shade and a resting spot. Duggan accepted both. He sat in the shade, holding his bridle reins, and finished the pint, trying, as he drank, to recall where he was supposed to go. Violet had given him some money for a specific purpose but what that purpose was he could not remember. He did know that Violet would be angry. Gila City was no safe place with the widow on the warpath. Duggan wavered to his feet and mounted. In the saddle he could look over the cutbank, and did so. Horror struck him.

THERE, not a hundred yards away, rode a little band of Apaches, gaunt, bronzed, be-turbaned men on worn ponies. Duggan voiced one shrill yelp of fright and started from there. His heels dug into his horse's ribs and he lashed wildly with the reins. The horse, headed toward Gila City, started home. Duggan clung to his saddle horn and rode.

Whoops sounded behind. Duggan took one frightened look over his shoulder, clung all the tighter and closed his eyes to blot out the nemesis that pursued him. All the whiskey scared out of him, he clattered down the wash, expecting, with every moment, a bullet or an arrow in the back.

Duggan's horse checked, then urged ahead by flailing heels, went on, only to check again. The animal stopped. Unwillingly Duggan opened his eyes. There were horses all about him, and a pair of hard blue eyes stared up at him. A harsh voice rasped, "What's the idea of ridin' into the picket line? You drunk?"

Old man Duggan almost fainted with relief. He had reached the cavalry camp.

"'Paches," Duggan gasped. "They jumped me. I kilt two of 'em an—"

The cavalryman began to laugh. All about, harsh laughter sounded. Duggan straightened. Lean, brown, be-turbaned men were riding up, broad grins on their faces.

"Them boys?" the cavalryman said. "Are them the Apaches that jumped you? Them are our scouts."

Duggan gaped like a landed fish. The brown-turbaned men were dismounting and gathering around. The cavalry lieutenant pushed through the circle and spoke abruptly.

"What is that civilian doing here, Sergeant? Get him out of here!"

"Oh, Lawd," gasped old man Duggan, "lemme git out. Lemme go home an' die!"

"Git, then!" The sergeant released Duggan's bridle. "G'wan an' git out."

Duggan's horse moved. Behind Duggan laughter welled up. Duggan took one hasty look toward the houses and streets of Gila City. Men were riding out from town. Duggan kicked his horse in the ribs and rode.

He rode a circle, well outside the town. The horse was lathered from its run and wanted to stop. Duggan kept going. He completed the arc of his ride and, head hanging, reached the adobe house. He let the horse stand. Duggan, like a sheep-killing dog caught in the act, slunk into the adobe and sat down on his bed. The pint clinked in his pocket and automatically he removed it, opened it and took a drink. He stared at the vacant door. The drink did not help and the door told him nothing.

Clearly now he recalled his vainglorius boasting, remembered the money Violet had given him, remembered his mission and why he had saddled and ridden out. He remembered his fright and his ride and the laughter that had followed him.

Two of Duggan's Mexican neighbors passed the door and looked in curiously. Duggan winced. He knew what lay in store for him, knew that by now the story was circulating in Gila City.

Duggan could not face it. This was a thing he could not lie down or live down. There in Bob Roberts' adobe iron entered old man Duggan's soul, the iron of fear. Not fear of physical hurt, or of death, but fear of scorn.. Old man Duggan got up. There was just one thing for him to do, one thing and one thing only: get out of Gila City and stay out. That was the answer.

The horse was still outside, standing on a a rein. Freeing that rein, Duggan put both reins up and mounted. He rode northeast. Behind him, the autumn sun in its circle began to slide down toward the hills. Duggan rode on. The horse, weary from the chase, developed a slight limp. Duggan did not heed. The limp increased, grew greater, and presently the horse quit—quit stone cold, refusing to move.

Old man Duggan roused from his lethargy. He tried to make the horse go on and could not. Dismounting, he tried to lead. The horse hung back. Old man Duggan swore. He took the shotgun from the saddle, took the saddle and dumped it by a palo verde, stripped off the bridle and turned the horse loose. He looked back the way he had come, grunted and stepped resolutely out. Again he went northeast. He was afoot and he had a long way to go. He would keep walking. Up in New Mexico, around Red River and E-town there was gold. Duggan had never been there but he was going. Nobody would know him in E-town. Not a soul. Duggan trudged along.

Before dark he reached a tank, a little pool of water. A jack-rabbit hopped out and ran, and the shotgun boomed. The rabbit fell and Duggan hastened forward. Dry mesquite made a fire and the rabbit made a meal. Duggan camped by the tank that night.

In the morning he moved on. He knew the country, knew the scant water holes, and he had laid out his course. Also he had changed his plans. Not E-town, but Silver City was now his destination. He walked that day, leaving the remnants of the pint

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alone, sweating the whiskey out of him. That night he camped by the Santa Cruz, below Tucson.

The third day found Duggan still traveling, but in sorry shape. His shoes were cut to bits by rocks. His legs were tired. At noon old man Duggan reached the end of his string. He just didn't give a good damn. Still he plodded ahead. He did not hear the horses coming, did not hear the voices. Not until hands seized him, did he lift his head. He was surrounded by grinning brown faces. A dirty savage poked him in the belly with a lance. Hands wrenched away the shotgun, hands searched him. Voices jabbered. Old man Duggan was thrust toward a horse, a sorry, ewe-necked nag. Mechanically, using the last of his strength, he mounted. His feet were lashed under the horse's belly. Again voices jabbered and then there was motion. Only the thongs that bound him held old man Duggan to the wooden saddle.

PRESENTLY the motion ceased. Duggan's feet were released and he was pulled down. Water, dirty and stinking, sloshed on his face and he drank, recovering a little strength. He saw a tiny fire, the faces of his captors now in bold relief, now in shadow, lighted by the flames. Duggan grunted, squirmed once and slept, and around the fire his immediate future was decided. Duggan didn't know or care.

There was debate about the fire. This group was part of Oso Rojo's band of Apaches, recently returned from Old Mexico and anxious to join their fellows. They were young bucks without reputation, and the debate concerned just that. Duggan had only one scalp and just one man could claim it; therefore, each buck was jealous of the other. The debate waxed furious and finally a compromise was reached. To give due honor and glory to all, they would take Duggan with them, keeping him alive until such a time as they rejoined the main party. Then all could see that a captive had been taken, and all could enjoy the final torture. It was typical savage reasoning. Old man Duggan snored.

Sleep restored him somewhat and in the morning there was further restoration. In order that their captive might have strength to entertain them, the Apaches fed Duggan, giving him jerky made from horse meat, and water to drink. They mounted him on the ewe-necked horse again, tying both hands and feet. The horse was a bay mare, long-backed, long-coupled, the sorriest appearing nag of all the ponies, but taller than most. A buck led the bay mare and the others clustered around. They traveled west, moving like shadows through the country. Long before noon they had crossed the Santa Cruz and still rode west. Up ahead of Duggan the leaders stopped. There was excited chatter. Duggan's captor, the buck that led the bay mare, joined the others. Duggan, from the height of the mare's back, could see the object of their attention.

Down below on the flats were slowly-moving wagons. Away to the west was a little dust cloud. Around Duggan the savage voices chattered.

Old man Duggan's little piggy eyes were keen. Old man Duggan was not worth a damn. He was a coward, a liar, a cheat and a thief. But old man Duggan saw those wagons and knew what the savage voices planned. He couldn't get away, he knew he couldn't make it, not on this sorry nag, but he could at least give a warning. Old man Duggan leaned forward and jabbed his thumbs into the long ewe neck. And Upstairs the Big Bookkeeper marked a credit for Aloysius Duggan.

The bay mare jumped her length, jerking the rawhide lead rope from a savage hand. The bay mare stretched her ewe neck. Long hip muscles bunched and rippled. The bay mare broke through and went downhill. Yells went up. A shot sounded. Arrows hissed and ponies broke to run as Apache whips fell. But what was this? The bay mare gained, the bay mare opened distance. The ewe neck was straight now and stretched, the nostrils flared, the long, flat legs opened and closed like scissors cutting cloth. But this was distance that they cut, twenty-four feet at a stride. The bay mare had been stolen down in Mexico, a sorry nag, brought along to be butchered when the time came. But she would never be butchered now.

Down on the flats the wagons stopped in a hastily-formed circle and from that circle little puffs off smoke appeared. The bay mare struck the flats and now she really ran, and old man Duggan, bent flat against her neck, lifted a hoarse voice.

" 'Paches.' 'Paches.' Look out! They're comin'!"

Over in the west, the dust cloud grew.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rifles for Red Killers

IT TOOK Dandy Bob Roberts just twenty-four hours to reach Tucson. His travel during the night was unmolested and in the morning, drawn and red-eyed, he changed horses at Pajaritos and rode on. That evening found him stabling his horse and taking his rest in a wagon yard. In the morning he went about his business, and as he talked, only half his mind was on his work. A disturbing thing had happened on the trip to Tucson, a thing that Bob could not explain.

Below Tucson, thirty miles from town, Bob Roberts had found tracks. He was not following any road but was cutting across country when he discovered this sign. Bob was not an expert trailer; he could not, as the saying goes, "track a lizard across a rock," but he was fair enough. Here, in hard sand, he saw the tracks of broad-tired wagons and narrow-footed mules. He followed them. Presently the tracks of unshod horses came in from the west, paralleling the wagon tracks. Bob came to a spot where men had dismounted and in the confusion of sign he made out that both moccasined men and boot-shod men had been present. Then the horse tracks swept away, again toward the west, and the wagon tracks went on to the stage road. Bob Roberts had those tracks in mind as he moved about Tucson, visiting wholesale liquor dealers, buying wagons and mules, and interviewing men.

There was no trouble concerning the liquor, the wagons or the mules. All these were for sale and available, but hiring men was different. Past association made Bob fully conversant with the Old Pueblo's tough nuts and he wanted tough men with him; but most of those he approached wished no part of driving freight through Apache country.

Bob hired four men, and one of those he didn't want. Buckshot Severs, five times indicted for murder, five times cleared, said that he would go. Manuel Sisneros, suspected of being one of the Mimbres gang of outlaws, agreed to drive a wagon. Herman Dotmann, stolid and Dutch, said that he was not doing anything that wouldn't keep, and old Dad Purcell announced that he intended to visit Gila City anyhow. It was Dad that Dandy Bob felt he could do without. Purcell had been a buffalo hunter and drifted down to the Old Pueblo from the plains country. He shook with palsy and carried a muzzle-loading rifle which he loaded with round ball. He had been a good man in his day, but now his day was over. Still, he could ride a wagon. Looking at Dad Purcell, Dandy Bob wished that he had brought Duggan along.

Bob was still searching for men when Wilsey Lea found him.

"Hear you're takin' some freight to Gila City, Roberts," Lea said briskly. "That right?"

Bob eyed his questioner narrowly. "That's right," he agreed. "Two loads."

"I'm pullin' out myself in the mornin'," Lea drawled. "Which way you goin'?"

"Stage road, I guess. There's a cavalry patrol down that way. Looks like it would be best."

"Uhhuh. Got men enough?" There was just a tinge of superiority in Lea's voice.

Bob rose to it. "Plenty," he assured. "Enough to go through all right."

"That's good." Lea turned away. "Maybe I'll see you on the road."

"Maybe," Bob returned, and resumed his search. He had no luck, not even after dark when part of Tucson got drunk and reckless.

In the morning, while warehouse men loaded his two wagons, Bob saw Wilsey Lea pull out of town. There were three big wagons, each with a trailer, each pulled by ten teams, a driver on each wagon, a helper on each trailer. Besides these, Lea had two men besides himself, a compact, well-organized outfit, strong enough, barring complete surprise, to drive off the ordinary Apache raiding crew. Nine hard-shooting men, forted up in wagons, could take care of a lot of Apaches. Dandy Bob wished that he were as well fixed.

Some two hours after Lea's departure, Dandy Bob left Tucson. Severs drove one wagon, with Dad Purcell riding on the seat; Sisneros and Dotmann formed the crew of the other outfit. Having no trailers, Bob's wagons were drawn by six teams each, the

driver riding the nigh wheel mule and handling the jerkline, the helper handling the brake. They creaked down Tucson's street and, entering open country, strung out along the stage road.

FORTUNE favored them. All through the long, hot day they rolled along in their own dust and as night approached and they reached a camping place, they saw wagons ahead, already stopped by water. Bob's outfit rolled in and Wilsey Lea, advancing from the fire, spoke to him.

"I don't know what ailed me yesterday, Roberts. It never struck my mind. There ain't no reason why we shouldn't travel together, is there?"

Suspicion flashed in Bob's mind, but his face was impassive. "We're headed the same place," he said.

"Throw off an' unhitch then," Lea grinned. "We got coffee made an' stew on the fire. Make yourselves to home."

Dandy Bob dismounted. There was something wrong about this, something queer about the whole deal. Buckshot Severs thought so, too. Trust a murderer to be suspicious!

"What's on his mind, Bob?" Buckshot asked as he bent to unhook his leaders.

"I don't know," Bob admitted. "Keep your eyes open." He went on to pass the warning to Manuel. No use to speak to Dad Purcell.

Teams were unharnessed, watered and staked out to grass. Bob and his men ate of the stew and drank coffee, made welcome by Lea's crew. Severs stayed close to Bob with Manuel hovering in the background. Dad Purcell stuffed his pipe and lit it. Then, securing lead, a ladle and a mold from his bedroll, sat by the fire.

"Ain't got no balls for my gun," he observed. "Better cast a few." Lead melted in the ladle over the coals. Purcell smoked the mold and made the castings, dropping his lead balls into water.

"Twenty to a pound," he announced. "Man gits one of these things in his gizzard he knows he's got somethin'." Dad finished his work, cooled his tools and replaced them.

Weary men went to bed while Lea posted a horse guard.

"No need of you puttin' a man on," he informed Bob. "One's enough."

"We'll take our turn," Bob replied. "I like to have everybody awake before light comes. Apaches don't move at night, but look out in the mornin'!"

Lea nodded. "Suits me," he agreed.

The night passed without incident. Bob, rousing at three, wakened Severs. Before dawn streaked the sky everybody was up and alert. Breakfast was eaten, teams watered, harnessed and hitched to the wagons. The two outfits pulled out together.

Five miles down the road, Lea joined Dandy Bob. "There's a turn-off ahead," he said. "Saves ten miles. We always take it. Okay?"

Into Bob Roberts' mind flashed the picture of the broad tire tracks, the tracks of unshod ponies, the sign of moccasins and boots intermingled. Into his mind, too, flashed that ugly rumor. Apaches with new guns, modern repeaters. Lea's two outriders had dropped back with him. Lea's eyes were narrow-lidded, half hidden.

"Did you take the cutoff comin' up?" Bob drawled.

"I always take it," Lea answered. He rode beside Bob. Beyond him, between Lea and the wagon, rode his two outriders. Buckshot Severs sat his nigh wheeler, the shotgun that gave him his name across his saddle pommel.

"Buck," Bob called.

Severs turned his head, lifting it inquiringly. That was all Bob Roberts wanted.

"So did I take the cutoff, Lea," he said. "I saw your tracks an' I saw where they met you. Got the guns this trip?"

He moved as he spoke, his hand going down for his Colt.

Lea was not taken by surprise. He did not match Bob's movement; there was no need. Wilsey Lea and his two men had come back to kill Bob Roberts and Lea's gun was already in his hand, drawn, hidden from Bob by Lea's horse. The gun came up . There was a flash, a roar, and Bob's horse went down. As he fell Dandy Bob Roberts fired three times into that smoke, centering on Wilsey Lea. Behind Bob, Severs' shotgun exploded twice.

Bob scrambled up. Lea's horse ran wild and Wilsey Lea lay on the ground. Beyond him was a man pinned by a horse, victim of Severs' shotgun blast. Past struggling man and horse, another horse and rider moved.

The rider swayed in the saddle, toppled and fell. The wagons were stopped. Buckshot Severs cursed as he scrambled down from his saddle, cursed as he shoved brass shells into the reeking breech of his gun. Manuel and Dad Purcell came running. From Lea's wagons came other men, alarmed, frightened, weapons in their hands. Wide legged, flanked by Severs, backed by Purcell, Manuel Sisneros and Dotmann, Dandy Bob Roberts faced these men.

"Hands up!" he snapped. "Drop them guns!" Long-barreled Colt wove a little, circling pattern. Severs' shotgun, Dad Purcell's muzzle loader, Manuel's rifle, Dotman's rifle, echoed the command. "Drop 'em an' stan' still!"

SLOWLY men lowered their weapons, letting them slide down to fall on the sand. Slowly hands were raised.

"Lea ain't dead," Manuel announced.

Bob Roberts, gun dangling, walked to the man he had shot. Wilsey Lea's eyes were open. His lips twitched into a mockery of a smile. Bob bent close.

"You'll never make it through," Lea gasped. "You'll . . . never . . . make . . ." His breath broke on a little soughing gasp.

"Done gone." Severs spoke beside Bob. "Why was it, Bob? I seen him throw up his gun, an' I seen them other two. But why?"

"Meant to kill us," Bob answered briefly. "He's been haulin' guns to sell to the Apaches. Figured to get our loads of liquor, too. Come on an' we'll find out."

Manuel, Purcell and Dotmann kept teamsters and roustabouts under surveillance while Severs and Dandy Bob lifted a dead horse and rescued the man pinned beneath it. That man, under pressure, talked. He was Carlos Pina, of unsavory reputation, and he talked to save his life. Yes, Wilsey Lea had meant to kill Roberts, as well as his drivers. The wagons were to be burned after their loads had been cached. And in the second of Lea's wagons were fifteen rifles, all new guns. It had all been arranged. Oso Rojo's Apaches would meet the wagons at Salado wash and exchange gold for the weapons.

Bob and Severs looked at each other. "That's what he meant when he said we wouldn't make it." Bob nodded grimly toward the place where Lea's body lay. "He figured on the Apaches. We'll fool him. We'll give 'em the guns, an they won't touch us."

"Not me," Severs growled. "I'm no good, Roberts, but I don't give guns to Apaches."

"You'll give 'em these guns," Dandy Bob said levelly. "Or I will, after I've plugged the barrels. Dad, you build a fire an' get your lead ladle out. Manuel, you an' Herman pick up the guns these men have dropped. Buck an' me'll watch 'em."

Buckshot Severs grinned and swung his shotgun. "Lead in the barrels," he crowed. "Guess that ought to do it. All right, Manuel, I've got 'em covered."

For a time there was bustling activity. Sullen men stood by under the menace of Severs' shotgun. Purcell built a fire, put on the ladle filled with lead. Manuel and Herman, having searched each teamster, each roustabout, piled weapons on Severs' wagon, brought bright new guns from Lea's wagons. Lea's horse and the horse of Lea's second guard were caught and led in. The saddle was stripped from Bob's dead horse.

"She's melted," Purcell announced.

It was Dandy Bob who poured lead into the new guns. Severs held them and Bob tipped the ladle gently and watched the bright metal trickle down the barrels. Fifteen guns, brass mounted .45-70's, Winchester repeaters of the latest pattern. When each had been treated, the breech was opened and Bob looked into the barrel.

"Plugged solid," he stated. "Hope the Apaches don't think of that."

Buckshot Severs grunted. "There never was an Indian that knew how to take care of a gun," he said. "They won't. Anyhow, it's a chance we got to take. What about these jaspers, Bob? Kill 'em?" He spoke of Lea's teamsters.

Dandy Bob considered a moment, then shook his head. "Start 'em walkin'," he said. "Head 'em back for town."

Severs considered that, then grinned. "Well, maybe their friends will get 'em," he said. "All right, We'll start 'em walkin'."

The teamsters, informed of what would happen if they looked back, were started on their long walk back to town. Six men trudged off through the sand while Manuel watched them with his rifle.

"Now," Bob said, "let's go. Dad, you

drive a wagon. Herman, you drive one. I'll drive one myself. That makes it come out right. Five men, five wagons. An' I hope Oso Rojo is on hand at Salado wash. I want to get this over with."

Loose horses were tied to wheel horse hames, wheel horses were mounted and the wagons moved.

Dusk had almost come when Roberts and his wagons reached Salado wash. Oso Rojo was waiting there, four half-naked bucks with him. Evidently Wilsey Lea had forbidden the Apache to bring more. He rode out to meet the wagons, right hand raised, palm forward in the old plains sign of peace, and Dandy Bob, on the lead wagon, checked his teams.

Oso Rojos spoke a bastard Spanish, capable of interpretation. He was curious. He wished to know the whereabouts of Wilsey Lea. Bob, whose own Spanish was good, made answer. Lea, he said, could not come, but he—and here he tapped his chest—had brought the guns. Had Oso Rojo brought the gold?

It was, Bob knew, touch and go. There were only five Apaches in sight, but all about, he was sure, were more, hidden in the wash, secreted behind rocks and brush. If Oso Rojo was dissatisfied, if he gave a signal. . . .

Oso Rojo grunted that he had brought gold. Where were the guns?

The guns were brought out. Oso Rojo counted them carefully and dumped a clinking buckskin bag on the ground. There was the payment, he said. And he needed more guns. He would pay for ten guns more and he would be at this spot to get them. When could these guns be brought to him?

Dandy Bob breathed more easily. If more guns were wanted, then for the moment he was safe. He shook his head, appearing to consider, then counted on his fingers and held up his hands. Eight days, he said. Eight days and he would bring ten guns.

Oso Rojo grunted agreement. Bob picked up the buckskin sack. The five Apaches, each carrying three new weapons, mounted their ponies and rode off.

"We'll keep travelin'," Dandy Bob Roberts stated. "We'll keep right on goin' until we're away from her. At that, we're safe enough. They'll never look at those guns tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE

Yellow-Legs

THE wagons kept traveling. For three hours they pulled through the dusk and gathering night. Then, almost back to the stage road, they stopped.

"Two days will see us into Gila City," Bob prophesied. "Just a little luck an' we'll make it."

"We'll make it," Buckshot Severs stated, bending over the frying pan. "Hell, with luck like yours, nothin' will stop us. I'll take first guard, Bob."

Severs took first guard, Herman Dotmann the second, Manuel the third. Bob relieved Manuel and let Dad Purcell sleep. Old Dad Purcell with his shaking hands and his muzzle-loading gun! He'd come in handy. The mules had been left harnessed and when dawn broke the camp stirred. Tugs were hooked and teams strung out. The five wagons moved across the flats.

They reached the stage road and followed it where it ran a quarter of a mile south of a long ridge. The whole world seemed at peace, bathed in the autumn sun. Then, high and quavering, a yell sounded from the ridge, followed instantly by whoops and the sound of shots. From the ridge a rider came pounding down, his horse at a long run, and behind that rider twelve Apache bucks were strung out.

Bob Roberts swung his teams, pulling into a circle, checked his horses and sprawled down on the wagon top. He squinted over rifle sights and closed his finger on the trigger. Then his head came up.

"Hold it!" yelled Dandy Bob Roberts. "The man in the lead is Duggan!"

There was a gap between the wagons, and Duggan, on the bay mare, came thundering in. Shots, deliberate, spaced, reached out for the Apaches. These, dropping to the sides of their horses, began a circle about the wagons. Peerless horsemen, peerless bowmen, the Apache. Arrows flickered in the sunlight. A horse screamed and went down, kicking in the harness. Dandy Bob Roberts was on the ground.

"Cut me loose an' give me a gun!" old man Duggan rasped. "Cut my feet loose."

Bob's knife flashed and old man Duggan tumbled down. The knife moved again and

his hands were free. Herman Dotmann came running from a wagon, bearing a spare rifle, one acquired from a Lea man.

Duggan crouched beside a wheel and fired and worked the lever.

"Damn' Injuns!" old man Duggan grunted. "Think they . . ." He fired again and a horse went down, the rider crawling off like a crazy bug.

Bob's rifle spoke and the crawling ceased. "Where in hell did you come from?" Bob demanded.

"Hell," said old man Duggan simply, and meant it.

Outside the wagons the circle broke. Apaches galloped back toward the ridge. Simultaneously, from Dad Purcell and Manuel Sisneros, yells went up.

"They're pullin' out!"

"Here comes the cavalry!""

Old man Duggan stood up, peered around the endgate of a wagon and swore. "Got a drink, Bob?" he demanded. "Say, ketch that mare. I want that mare, I do." Beyond the wagons riders pounded past, blue-clad men whose blue was hidden by dust.

"In the wagon," Bob Roberts directed. "I'll get some out. You earned a drink, Duggan."

The cavalry lieutenant, returning with his troopers from fruitless pursuit, found six men in the wagon enclosure, passing a bottle around. They offered him a drink but he refused. He was young and tanned and he wanted to know. The six men told him.

"So you broke free when you saw the wagons?" the lieutenant said, staring at Duggan. "You didn't have a chance, you know."

"I'm here, ain't I?" Duggan demanded, returning the stare.

The lieutenant nodded and stared more intently. "Aren't you the man our scouts chased into camp?" he asked. "I thought I recognized you."

Old man Duggan winced, then felt Bob's hand on his shoulder. "Duggan," Dandy Bob said, "never runs from Apaches except at exactly the right time. Ain't that so, boys?" Four men nodded solemnly, and Bob Roberts spoke again. "How come you're in this country, Lieutenant?"

"Road patrol," the officer answered briefly. "We jumped Oso Rojo's band this morning and they stood and fought for a while. Queer thing, too. They seemed to have a great deal of confidence. They were armed with rifles but only a few of them worked. When they ran, we found fourteen guns, every one new, and every one with the barrel burst or mushroomed. We followed on for a distance but lost them. Then we came back to the road."

"An' a good thing for us, too," Dandy Bob said. "Fourteen guns, you say?"

"Fourteen," the lieutenant repeated.

Around the little circle, eyes met eyes. The officer spoke. "We're returning to Gila City. "We'll escort you as far as Lapp Well."

"We'll camp at Lapp Well tonight," said Dandy Bob. "We'll like your company."

The officer and his sergeant left. Men climbed back on wheel horses. Duggan, limping, helped Dandy Bob catch the ewe-necked mare and fasten the rawhide lead rope to the hames of the off-wheel horse.

DANDY BOB, deserting the saddle on the nigh-wheeler, climbed to the wagon top beside Duggan and the wagons started, flanked by the cavalrymen.

"So," said Dandy Bob, "you run away from the scouts, did you?"

"I was lookin' for you," said Duggan. Yeah. I run away from 'em." The wheels creaked and Duggan talked, telling the truth, mainly, and when he was finished it was Bob Roberts' turn.

"What'll you do when we get in?" Duggan demanded when Bob was done. "What'll you do with Quentin?"

"Throw it in his face," Bob answered grimly. "That what I'll do. Him an' Lea was pardners."

Duggan nodded thoughtfully. Partners stood together, in good or evil. Old man Duggan understood that. Look at him and Dandy Bob Roberts!

Lapp Well was reached at sundown and camp was made, two separate camps, the military and the civilian. Bob spoke briefly to Buckshot Severs, to Manuel Sisneros, to Herman and to Dad Purcell. They nodded their agreement. What they knew was not a thing for the Army. Their knowledge was their own and they would act on it.

Bob walked over to the soldiers' fire. "Lieutenant," he said, "we got some fixin's on the wagons that would maybe help out Government rations. If the sergeant an' a

couple of men would come over . . .?"

The officer, young but seasoned, grinned understandingly and nodded. "Sergeant," he ordered, "go with this man."

The sergeant and a trooper followed Dandy Bob. They returned, laden, and if there was a bottle or two in the load, who can say? Certainly not the officer, for he turned his back and walked away. What shoulder bars don't see, they do not know.

"We'll have a guard all night," the sergeant said before he left.

They slept that night, peacefully and undisturbed, and in the morning, still with the troopers accompanying them, went on their way. From Lapp Well to Gila City was twelve miles and six of these were accomplished. Then, ahead of the wagons, a trooper riding point threw us his hand and halted. The others came up and joined him. The wagons rolled up and stopped, the drivers climbing down. Blue-clad men made way for them.

"Do you know this man?" the lieutenant demanded, pointing.

Dandy Bob, Duggan, the others, clustered around the body. Ladd Quentin lay, face upturned to the sky. He had not been scalped, but his body was mutilated by many cuts and filled with arrows. And beside the body lay a new Winchester, .45-70, its barrel mushroomed.

"Man named Quentin," Bob said.

"I wonder why they didn't scalp him?" the lieutenant said.

"Because," quavered Dad Purcell, plainsman, buffalo hunter, who knew Indians, "they wanted his sperrut to keep livin'. Scalp a man, you kill his sperrut; leave his scalp an' his sperrut lives. Laws, but they must of hated him, fixin' him that-a-way. Injuns believe the sperrut is just like the dead man. Look how they cut his arms an' legs."

The lieutenant looked at Dandy Bob Roberts. "Will you put him on a wagon and take him in?" he asked.

"No," said Dandy Bob.

There was that in Bob Roberts' voice that forbade argument. The officer hesitated an instant, then turned. "We'll bury him here, Sergeant," he stated.

"Let's go," said Dandy Bob, and moved to his wagon.

The wagons rolled along. Looking back from the top of their load, Bob Roberts and old man Duggan could see troopers digging a grave.

"I guess," Bob said, "I won't throw it at him, Duggan. He come out to meet Lea an' Oso Rojo caught him. Thought he was me, likely. Thought he was the man that sold 'em those plugged guns. We looked a lot alike, folks said."

Duggan nodded gravely. "That's likely it," he agreed. "What are you goin' to do with the money you got for the guns, Bob? Keep it?"

"No." Dandy Bob shook his head. "I'm going to split it among the boys, Buckshot an' Dad an' Manuel an' Herman. They earned it."

"Yeah," Duggan agreed, "but where do you an' me come in?"

For a time Bob pondered that question. Then: "I don't think anybody will claim Lea an' Quentin's stuff," he said. "I don't know and I don't care. It'll have to go to court for settlement an' we can't get at it. But two of these wagons belong to us, that was part of the deal, an' whoever claims the freight in the other wagons is goin' to pay us for haulin' it. I think, if we play it smart, we can get the teams an' wagons, too. That gives us a freightin' outfit, an' freightin' pays good. Especially when the Apaches are out. We ought to do all right."

"Yeah," Duggan agreed absently, hardly heeding Bob. "Yeah, that's right."

"What have you got on your mind?" Bob asked sharply, noting his partner's preoccupation. "What devilment are you figurin' on now?"

"No devilment," Duggan refuted. "You know me, Bob. I wouldn't start a thing. Only that mare . . ."

"What about the mare?" Bob demanded.

"Why," said Duggan, "not much. Only that mare c'n outrun her shadder. She's jest got wings, I'm tellin' you. You seen her come down off the hill. You an' me c'n take that mare an' make some money, Bob. We c'n go over to Yuma an' race her. An' after we clean out Yuma, there's Oro Grande an' Phoenix an' Silver City an' Lordsburg. I tell you, Bob, there jest ain't no tellin' what we c'n do with that mare."

With a flourish, old man Duggan produced a bottle filched from the load, and took a long drink.

THE END

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

ANDREW CONNORS

Of all the fighting cowboys who learned their trade under old man Chisum's banner, Andy Connors was the youngest and one of the most fearless. At seventeen he was drawing a man's wages, and already had two notches on his gun recording his prowess against rustlers.

He could ride anything you could cinch a saddle onto, and a lot that you couldn't. His skill as a bronc buster kept his buddies in spending money, as they laid their bets in every settlement they passed through while hazing trail-herds all the way from Texas clear across New Mexico.

Nor was Andy backward in dealing with outlaws who infested the Chisholm Trail. Ask the spirits of Hernandez Baca and his murderous companions, who was it rode into their Red River hideout and blasted the gang into ghostland; who was it rode out of their hidden canyon, driving their herd of stolen cattle ahead of him?

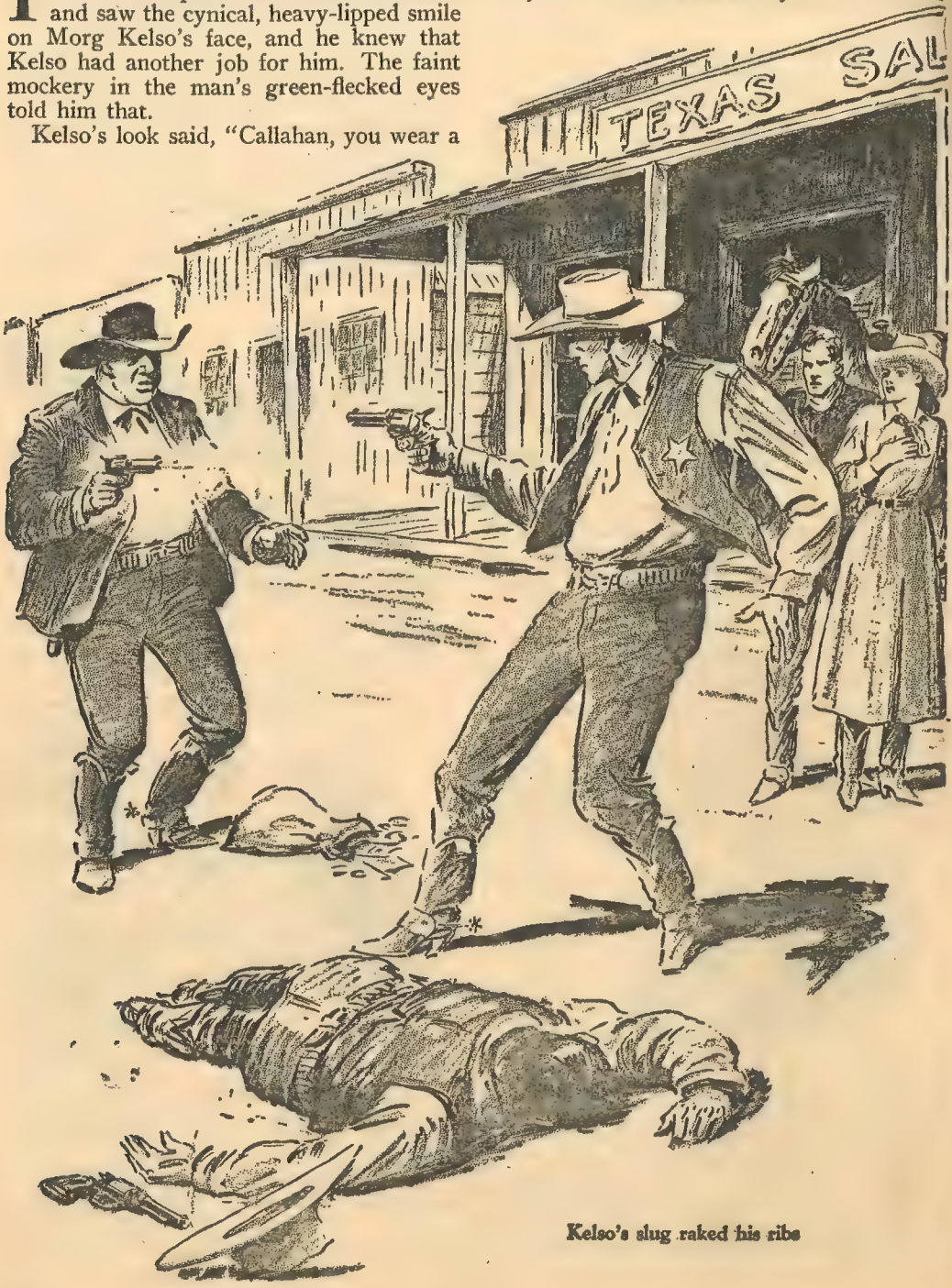
Cheated of three month's pay by a crooked faro dealer in Taos, N.M., Andy swapped two shots with the dealer and a bouncer named Wells. When the noise subsided, Andy regained his money, left his opponents to be buried in boothill.

Andy Connors died in 1887, a worthy member of the Honorable Order of Frontiersmen.

DIME-A-DOZEN LAW!

IT WAS an old story to Jim Callahan. He looked up from his inch-thick steak and saw the cynical, heavy-lipped smile on Morg Kelso's face, and he knew that Kelso had another job for him. The faint mockery in the man's green-flecked eyes told him that.

Kelso's look said, "Callahan, you wear a mighty big and shiny star, but I pinned it on you. I'm the boss and you know it. I



Kelso's slug raked his ribs

Sheriff Jim Callahan's two deadly partners bought his guns, grub and booze—and would soon make a cash bid for his soul!

throw a lot of easy money your way, and all I ask is for you to take my orders—and maybe to sell me your soul."

Such were Jim Callahan's thoughts as he looked into Kelso's eyes. Nor were they new thoughts. But, somehow, this night was different. A man can get his fill of anything—even of making dishonest dollars by the bootfuls. Jim Callahan felt, at this moment, as if the sight of another crooked Kelso dollar would make him sick. He shoved the steak away from him and rose from his chair, almost violently.

"Take it easy, Jim," Kelso said. "You off your feed? Step down to the Texas and I'll buy you a drink."

Morg Kelso kept smiling. The gaunt, dark figure of Deacon Shafter, who was Kelso's shadow, moved forward. The Deacon said nothing. He simply stared at Jim Callahan, his black eyes holding sardonic amusement.

Big Morg Kelso laid a hand on Callahan's arm. "Come along, Jim. Some business I want to talk over with you."

Callahan let the hand stay there. He never moved. But in the narrow room his quiet voice sounded loud.

"For once, Kelso, your business can wait. I'm going to bed."

Kelso's smile disappeared. His heavy-lidded eyes no longer held mockery, nothing so mild as that. "Callahan, you better hold on."

Deacon Shafter swung half around. His black stare raked the room. Chairs were shoved back, boots scraped the floor. When the Deacon faced Jim Callahan again, the cafe might as well have closed its door.

"You see, Callahan?" Morg Kelso murmured. "I could have picked a better place for this—but they still jump." They were both watching Callahan, both waiting. When he had nothing to say, Kelso went on, "Don't be a fool, Jim! This young slick-ear rode in this morning, with ten thousand dollars in his saddlebags. My man Gleason, who runs the hotel, sent him to me. He wants to buy a ranch, and as it so happens—"

"I know, Kelso, I know." Callahan's anger had burned away, leaving only weary disgust. "You'll sell him a thousand head at ten dollars a round, book count. You'll have me along, the honest sheriff, to convince the poor dogie that you're plumb reliable. He gets to lookin', he'll find maybe a hundred head of wind-bellies that—Tell me, Kelso, how many times have you sold that bunch of scabby Two K Bars?"

"You mean, Jim," and Kelso's voice was a whispered sneer, "how many times have you *helped* me sell those cows. Don't *you* start callin' the kettle black! What brought on all this Honest Abe stuff?"

"You wouldn't understand, Kelso. I guess I don't give a damn what other people think. But when a man gets so low-down that he can't even live with himself—ah, the hell with it. I've got all the rotten money I need. I've helped you; you've helped me. So we're even. I'm pulling out. Don't try to stop me."

"I won't *try*, Jim," Kelso said softly. "No one runs out on Morg Kelso. I'll give you tonight to think it over."

Callahan was watching the two men before him. He was aware of movement beyond them. Then Kelso shifted so that the front door came within his vision. Callahan stared past him at the pair that had come blundering in.

The young fellow could not have been more than eighteen. His eyes, beneath the brim of his gray sombrero, looked black in the lamplight, but Callahan guessed they must be blue. And, going further, he guessed that the bulging saddlebags—dead weight that pulled the lad's right arm straight down—must be filled with ten thousand dollars in gold and currency. This, he told himself, surely was the fatted lamb Morg Kelso intended to shear.

Callahan gave the girl only a casual glance. Right pretty. Probably the boy's sister. Women meant nothing in his life. But the innocent lamb with the moneybags . . . it was like trying to recall a face from a dream. A face that tormented you but wouldn't quite come clear.

The girl was frowning a little. The young man's free left hand clamped her arm. "Come on Viv," he said, "I don't like the looks of—"

Morg Kelso stepped forward, his heavy face smiling again. "Blanchett," he said heartily, "I just started to look for you. Place here is closing, but I took it on myself to arrange a little private supper in my rooms, at the hotel. I won't hear any excuses, either, Tip. Not with such a lovely young woman to sit across from me." His chuckle was masterpiece of indulgent appreciation.

Viv Blanchett smiled at him. "We'd be delighted, Mr. Kelso."

Morg Kelso swung around toward Jim Callahan, and immediately all the joviality left him. The bullying meanness of the man gathered in his eyes but his voice remained cordial. "Sheriff Jim, you're included in that supper invitation. Step up and meet some mighty nice new friends of mine."

VIV BLANCHETT was watching Callahan, her brown eyes doubtful, as if she didn't quite know how to take him. Callahan hardly knew she was in the room. His gray, somber stare was on Tip Blanchett, and he knew now why young Tip's face tormented him. For there was one face he would never forget; it was stamped on his mind as indelibly sharp as the face on a coin. The face before him bore only a slight resemblance to that face, but the name was the same: Blanchett.

"*Nice* friends, Kelso?" Callahan was still watching Blanchett, and the ugly rasp of his voice was like a slap across the young fellow's face.

"Look here, now, Jim!" Morg Kelso blustered. Viv Blanchett drew in a sharp breath, while young Tip's face turned pale.

Callahan strode past them, then turned. "No supper, Kelso, but you rig up that deal. Whet yo' shears plumb sharp—because, this time, I want to take the wool clean down to the skin."

That old look came seeping back into the eyes of Kelso and of Deacon Shafter, the mockery that was close to contempt. Callahan went out the door with the smooth words of Morg Kelso following him.

"Good old Jim. I told you, Deacon, we could depend on Sheriff Jim. . . ."

The night breeze was cool on Callahan's skin as he rounded the corner of the jail building, going toward his living quarters in back. Something like a fever was burning in him. He paused at the door and heard his horse stamping yonder under the shed. He was half a mind to saddle up and ride out of here and never come back. For never before had his bitterness carried him to the point of making war on a youngster, or of hurting a woman. But this time, this case, was different.

Jim Callahan's eyes were focused on a blue star, above the distant mesquites. When the star blurred, and in its place he saw Lester Blanchett's face, Callahan uttered a savage curse. He went on inside and closed the door behind him.

Until near midnight Jim Callahan lay tossing on his bunk. Sleep would not come. Finally, disgusted with himself, he got up and dressed and went out into the soft darkness. He thought, half angrily, "What's wrong with you, Callahan? You were the fellow who said to hell with hard work and honesty. You were going to make a dollar, wherever you found it. You were going to make yours, no matter who you hurt. Well, you haven't got a friend in God's world, so don't start changin' yo' colors now."

He moved past his horse shed, past the back of the Texas Cafe, a tall shadow in the deeper shadow of the buildings. And he thought, "That kid, Tip—a few more years on him and he'll look considerable like Les Blanchett, at that. Wonder if he'll be as sorry as Les was. Wonder how Kelso figures to work this deal. A kid like that, it ought to be easy. . . ."

Callahan stopped. He held himself entirely still, watching the man who had slipped out the back door of the hotel. It was Roy Gleason, his bald head like a gold knob in the half moonlight. A saddle or some other bulky object swung from his right hand, bumping against his leg as he hurried along.

Callahan waited, watching with a mild curiosity until the hotelman's blurred figure turned in at the back door of the livery stable, several buildings down from the hotel. Now, where, he wondered, was that oil-slick son going, this time of night? He went on around the hotel, to the board walk in front of it, and stopped there to make up a cigarette. He struck a match against one of the porch posts, held it to

the cigarette's tip and heard a quick, low voice say, "Sheriff — Sheriff Callahan. Could I talk to you a minute?"

Callahan turned and made out the slim figure of Viv Blanchett, on the hotel porch. He wondered if Morg Kelso had started his squeeze, if the girl was going to ask help from him. He set his boots down hard, going up the steps, and when he stood before the bench where she sat, his voice struck through the thin darkness with almost savage bluntness.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

She drew herself up, said stiffly, "I'm sorry. I didn't know your time was so valuable. I only wanted a bit of information."

"What about, Miss Blanchett? My time isn't valuable. I just was born with this disposition."

"It's about Mr. Kelso," she said. "My brother and I—buying a ranch is a mighty big step for us. The biggest in our lives. It's something we've worked for and dreamed about for a long time. We simply can't take a chance of—of anything going wrong. We saw Mr. Kelso's advertisement in a San Antonio newspaper, and came down here. But—"

Callahan heard her swallow. He said, "I can understand how you feel. What about Morg Kelso?"

"It's hard to explain. His terms seem reasonable, if the ranch is what he says it is. It's the Two K Bar. We're to inspect it in the morning. Tip likes Mr. Kelso and I feel almost certain he'll want to buy it, but—well, call it a woman's intuition. The way Mr. Kelso looks at me—I—there's something I can feel. Something I'm afraid of."

"Maybe, Miss Blanchett, you'd better let your brother tend to these business matters," Callahan suggested. "The Two K Bar is a fine little ranch. Good water, good grass. I don't know what Kelso's askin', but it's worth all of ten dollars an acre. Kelso is about the best-fixed man around here. And he can't help it because he's got green eyes. Good night, Miss Blanchett."

"Wait!" she said. "Sheriff Callahan, you —you interest me. I keep thinking I've seen you before."

"You haven't," he said harshly, and swung away from her. He went down the steps, moving tall and bitter and alone into the quiet night.

THE Deacon drove them out in a two-seated buggy from the livery stable, Morg Kelso, young Tip and the girl. Through the open doorway of his office in the jail building, Callahan watched them go by—big Morg smiling at Vivian, her face and Tip's alive with excitement. This was a momentous occasion, to them. Callahan wondered where they got the money. Wondered if it came from Lester Blanchett.

Callahan was puzzled. He had thought Morg Kelso would be around to see him, to tell him what role to play, to give him his orders. But since last night, in the cafe, he had not talked with Kelso. Maybe, he thought, Kelso had decided to leave him out of it. He didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed, but one question kept needling him: How was Kelso going to pull the deal?

Callahan spent the morning on routine business, but instead of the papers spread out before him he kept seeing Viv Blanchett's brown eyes. He kept wondering how

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rough Kelso would be. Kelso really seemed to like the girl. The thought came to Callahan that perhaps, this time, Kelso would play it straight. Big Morg could afford to swap a sure ten thousand bucks for a chance at Viv Blanchett. Maybe he would—but somehow that thought didn't sit well with Jim Callahan. He shoved back his chair, got up and walked down to the cafe. He ordered coffee, and found himself sitting beside Roy Gleason.

"Sleep well last night, Gleason?"

The little hotelman's bald head jerked around. "Huh? Yeah—yeah—of course! Always sleep well."

"Then maybe you were walkin' in your sleep. Walkin' toward the livery stable, about midnight, packin' something that looked like a saddle."

"Like hell!" Gleason said. "I wasn't walkin' in my sleep, nor any other way. But maybe you was dreamin'."

He got up, slammed a coin on the counter and added viciously: "From what I hear, Callahan, you been havin' a lot of funny dreams. I hear you're gettin' plumb touched in the head."

Callahan watched him go out the door, thinking, "You lying son. You're mixed in this some way. You're Kelso's man . . . just like I am."

Kelso's man. . . . Somehow, that thought rankled. Callahan didn't try to deceive himself. He had come here eight years ago, a young man, a bitter man, flat broke. He had met Kelso and the Deacon at the Texas Bar. All Kelso owned then were a few acres of mesquite land, a few head of cattle, but Callahan had gone to work for him. From cowhand, to foreman, to sheriff; from being a little careless where he threw a loop, to running wet-backs across the Rio Grande by hundreds, to helping Kelso on deals like the present one—deals that got a little rawer each year. That was the way it had gone. And now Callahan had money in a Laredo bank. Now Morg Kelso owned the Texas Bar, the hotel, the livery stable, not to mention his cattle and land; and he thought he owned Jim Callahan, body and soul.

That, Callahan told himself, was what graveled a man. That was why he ought to saddle and ride out. That was what he would do! No use to hang on here, have a real run-in with Kelso—and the Deacon—and get himself killed. Callahan got his horse and rode down to the blacksmith shop.

"I got a little trip to make," he told brawny Will Todd. "Shoe up old Red all around."

Will Todd shoved out a Flying M branding iron. "I've got three more of 'em to make, first," he said.

The look in his steady eyes seemed to add, "You know that iron, Callahan. That's one of Morg Kelso's brands. He's your boss. He's your lord and master. Fellows like you have to wait. You know that, Callahan."

Callahan did know. But now an unreasonable anger rose up in him. His voice lashed out savagely. "Morg Kelso's not God Almighty. Some of you gutless wonders just think he is. I said shoe my horse, Todd. I want him shoed now."

Will Todd was not the man to make a leader, in any community. But he was honest, sober and industrious; fellows like Will Todd formed the backbone of many a town. He was watching Callahan intently, but when he spoke his voice was mild, as always.

"Maybe we've been wrong about you, Callahan. You're the one who might stand up, who might be able to help this place. You'd have to change a lot, but—"

"Save the sermon," Callahan said roughly. "All I want from you is to get my horse shod."

He went out and stood with his back against the smith's front wall, the sole of his right boot pressed against the unpainted boards, and made up a cigarette. He was a little ashamed for jumping Todd, that way. All Todd had done was to put into words what the whole county thought.

Callahan rode back to the jail building, his big sorrel stepping smartly on his new-shod hoofs. He left the sorrel under the shed and went in and pulled his old warbag from under his bunk. He dumped its meager contents on top of the bunk, intending to discard what he no longer wanted. He intended to travel light. He intended to leave a lot of things behind him.

A faded tintype, face up on the blanket, caught his eye. Two young trail hands, in shotgun leggings and shoved-back sombreros, one with a long cigar jaunty between his fingers, the other holding a quart

of whiskey — telling anyone interested enough to take a look that here were two uncurried sons of Texas, just hit the end of the trail. Callahan remembered when the tintype was made. Something like nostalgia tugged at his throat, and then the old bitter memories came rushing into his mind, and he threw the tintype from him.

"Damn you, Les Blanchett!" he muttered. "You played hell with my life. I wonder what you did with yours."

From behind him a sardonic voice said, "Talkin' to yourself, Callahan? Tryin' to bring back your lost youth, lookin' at those old possibles? Or is it you're fixin' to go someplace?"

The Deacon's dark eyes were mocking. Callahan said not a word.

"Morg wants you at the hotel, Callahan. You going to get stubborn?"

Ten thousand dollars, Callahan was thinking. He stared a moment at the tintype, near the wall where he had flung it.

"No, Shafter," he said. "I'm going to get sensible."

CALLAHAN heard Tip Blanchett's voice as he stepped through the hotel doorway. Grateful. Jubilant. "That little spread, it's just what I wanted! I don't know how I can ever thank—"

"Forget it, son. Forget it," said Morg Kelso, the big man who did things in a big way. "I want you folks for friends and neighbors, and I guess I can afford—Jim! There you are! Step in here a minute, will you?"

They were in the small room Gleason used for an office. Callahan saw Gleason's bald head, the smiling faces of young Tip and his sister. Kelso said, "Jim, I'm lettin' these fine folks have the Two K Bar for eight dollars an acre, with all the improvements. Five thousand down, the rest on easy terms. That'll leave Tip money to start stocking the place, and—What do you think of it, Jim?"

Callahan thought, "You never gave anything away in your life. It must be the girl you're after." Aloud he said, "I've already told Miss Blanchett what I think about the Two K Bar."

"Well, then, you won't mind witnessing the deal. I knew Tip would want the place, so I've had the papers drawn up."

From his coat pocket Kelso took folded papers. He spread them on Gleason's roll-top desk, then chuckled.

"It says here, Tip, 'For five thousand dollars paid in hand. . . .' So just to make this thing exactly right—Gleason, will you get out those saddlebags full of money?"

Gleason's hand, Callahan noted, shook a little as he went about opening the ancient safe beside his desk. He brought out a pair of saddlebags and thumped them onto the desk top.

"Those are yours, eh, Tip?" Kelso asked, chuckling again.

"If they're not," Tip declared, "then I'm crazy as a loon."

"No," Callahan thought. "Not crazy. Just a young damn fool. Kelso might as well have held you up with a gun."

He watched Tip shake the saddlebags' contents onto the desk top, watched young Tip's face go gray from shock, from unbelieving amazement.

"Rocks," he said. "Old newspapers and rocks. I don't—I can't—"

The girl's face was white, too. Then bright splashes of color came in her cheeks. She said fiercely, "Well, I can understand it. It's just plain robbery!"

"Robbery?" Morg Kelso tried to sound indignant. "My dear, I assure you—why, I saw Gleason put those saddlebags in his safe. So did you and your brother. But I merely took Tip's word about the money they contained. I can't see what Tip hoped to accomplish, but it looks like—"

"I can see!" Tip cried. "You and Gleason made this up. It was you suggested using Gleason's safe. Last night, when they went in that safe, there was a little more than ten thousand dollars in those saddlebags."

"Did you get a receipt for it?" Kelso asked.

"You know I didn't! I trusted you! But I'll get that money, or I'll—"

Tip reached for the shiny new Colt on his thigh. Behind him, like a shadow in the doorway, Deacon Shafter stood. Callahan didn't stop to think, didn't hestitate. He swung his gun upward and laid its barrel above Tip's ear.

The girl dropped to her knees beside her brother, sobbing. "Tip — Tip — all our plans!"

"Get him out of here," Callahan said roughly. "Out of town. He's not hurt

much. Get him to hell out of town!"

She looked up at him then, and her eyes flashed. "You—the honest sheriff."

CALLAHAN went out of there with those words bitter in his ear. "You—the honest sheriff." He told himself, "The hell with it, Callahan. The young fool's lost his money. Ten thousand dollars that probably came from Les Blanchett. You know where it is. Go get it and say *adios* to this town."

Blackie Tolbert was in the office of the livery stable — Kelso's man and Kelso's stable. He said, "Something for you, Sheriff?" His gold tooth gleamed. His eyes were black as sin.

Callahan said, "Not much, Blackie. Just a few dollars that belong to me. Dollars in a sack or something that, by moonlight, a man might mistake for a saddle. Open your safe, Blackie."

"Go to hell, Callahan. That money—"

Callahan's gun came into his hand. "Open the safe, Blackie."

Tolbert blustered—but he opened the safe. Then he gave a little yelp. Callahan left him on the floor, with a head that was going to bother him some. He went out the door with a heavy tow sack swinging from his left hand.

He was in his room, stuffing a few extra clothes into his warbag, when someone called, "Sheriff—Sheriff Callahan!" The door opened and Viv Blanchett came toward him.

"You've got to help me!" she cried, and her eyes were deep pools of anguish. "After all, you *are* the sheriff. Surely—"

She saw the sack, then. The open end of it had fallen past the edge of the bunk and a few gold coins had spilled out. While the girl stared, all the fire seemed to die in her.

"So you're in it, too," she said hopelessly. "That's Tip's money. He's still half out of his head, but he's going to try to get his money back. You'll kill him. You're all thieves and murderers!" She turned, headed blindly for the door.

"I wouldn't call it Tip's money. I'd call it Les Blanchett's money—part of what he stole from me." The harshness of Callahan's voice brought her back around.

"You knew Les—my brother."

He took three strides, picked up the tintype. He handed it to her and she stared at it, and after a time her chin began to tremble.

"Les—my brother, Les. He sent one to mom, just like it. You—why, you must be Jim Carson!"

"I used to be," Callahan said. "Before yo' brother and me went pardners. I thought a heap of him, trusted him. Just like folks up in Kiowa County trusted me. They were fixin' to make me sheriff. Then Les and me drove one last big herd north—a pool herd, made up from all over the county, with me, honest Jim, as trail boss. Those cows brought better than forty thousand dollars, and I was a plain damn fool. My pardner had gone head over heels for a girl who sang in a place there. Les got in a ruckus, gamblin', and I jumped in and helped him. I caught a slug that raked a lung. I knew I'd be laid up a month or so, and there's where I made my mistake. I started my pardner back to Texas, with the girl and the money. But what's the use of rakin' up all—"

"Go ahead," the girl said. "Please."

"He never reached Texas," Callahan said. "But I did. I rode back, still a sick man, a man who wanted to see his pardner, his home and friends. You know the rest; you can guess."

"Yes," she said, and her eyes were bright with tears. "They didn't believe you. They thought it was a put-up job between you and your partner. Except for old man McCracken, who still had a measure of faith in you, they would have hanged you. They compromised by escorting you to the county line and warning you never to come back. That was the bitterest thing of all, when the folks who had been your friends turned on you—wasn't it, Jim Callahan?"

"It was bitter enough," Callahan said. "Les Blanchett ruined my life. I wonder what he did with his. But that doesn't matter now, I guess. I'm leaving here, and I'm taking this money with me. Tell yo' brother that. Tell him there's no use to hang around and get himself killed."

The girl cried, "Callahan, wait! Les never wronged you. Les—"

HE NEVER stopped. He scooped up his warbag and the money sack and went out the door. His horse stood saddled under the shed, waiting. It was a fast

horse, a horse that could take him the twenty miles to the Rio Grande. A horse that could take him to wherever he wanted to go. He tied his warbag and the sack of money onto the saddle, put his leg across—and saw Viv Blanchett, with something like pity in her eyes, standing at his stirrup.

She said, "You might as well go, Callahan. Because you think one man — my brother — wronged you, you've let your whole life go to smash. I guess, Callahan, you never really had faith in anyone. You might as well go."

Callahan stared after her as she went away. Her lithe body was arrow straight, her head up and proud. She was a lot like Les, he thought, the old Les he had known. Impulsive. Spirited. She would make some man a fine wife. Something like warmth stirred inside Callahan, and he wanted to call out to her, to stop her. Instead he touched spurs to his horse, turning the beast south.

He went past the corner of the jail building. He saw Kelso and the Deacon wheel onto the street from the livery stable, and a wry humor tugged at his thin lips. He guessed that pair were some put out. He saw the girl moving along the edge of the street, toward the hotel; saw young Tip lurch down the hotel steps, and he wanted to shout.

But it was no worry of his if the young fool got himself killed. He was Kelso's man, Kelso's curly dog. Every time Kelso tossed him a bone he did his bag of tricks and said, *"Woof, woof."* So that girl, who was Les Blanchett's sister, could tell him, "Callahan, you might as well go. Your life's ruined, Callahan. Your life's gone to smash."

And it was. When a man couldn't even stand to look at himself in a mirror, his life was ruined. No matter how much rotten money he had, or how far he rode, there would never be any happiness for him. But that girl, and the kid. It wasn't their fault Les Blanchett was their brother. Maybe they could be happy, useful, industrious citizens such as he and Les Blanchett once had planned to be. No reason why they shouldn't, unless the kid got himself killed. . . .

Callahan had turned his horse. He was riding toward the Deacon and Morg Kelso. To his left and nearer, he saw Tip and the girl. She grabbed the boy's arm, appeared to be pleading with him. He shook her off. He kept moving toward Kelso and the Deacon, with less than thirty yards now separating them.

The boy didn't see Callahan until the big red horse had stopped beside him, and even he couldn't know what Callahan's intentions were. He turned, furious, snarling. His hand dropped to his gun.

For Callahan it was like taking a milk bottle from a baby. His right hand clamped the boy's wrist, twisted. The new gun lifted a puff of dust as it struck, and Callahan's boot toe sent the gun skittering away. Young Tip was still a little groggy. He staggered and almost fell when Callahan shoved him.

Morg Kelso called, "You, Callahan! Which side you on? What's all this about?"

His hands methodical, Callahan unstrapped the money sack. He slapped his horse away. "I've got a present for you, Morg," he said, and he was pacing forward, the heavy sack swinging from his left hand.

He watched Kelso and the Deacon edge away from each other, and suddenly his blood was singing like wine in his veins. He thought, "Great God! Why, I'm happy! I'm happy as a king! Maybe this is what they meant by washin' a sinner clean, because I'm sure gunna get a washin'."

HE KEPT going until he heard Kelso's heavy breathing, until he saw the meanness in the man's eyes. He was aware of the Deacon, who would be the faster one, standing a bit to one side, waiting. He said again, "I've got a present for you, Morg. I've helped in your dirty work. I've disgraced the office I hold. But I figure that this little gift is going to make up for some of that. You want it now?" The clear challenge in his voice ran the length of the dusty street.

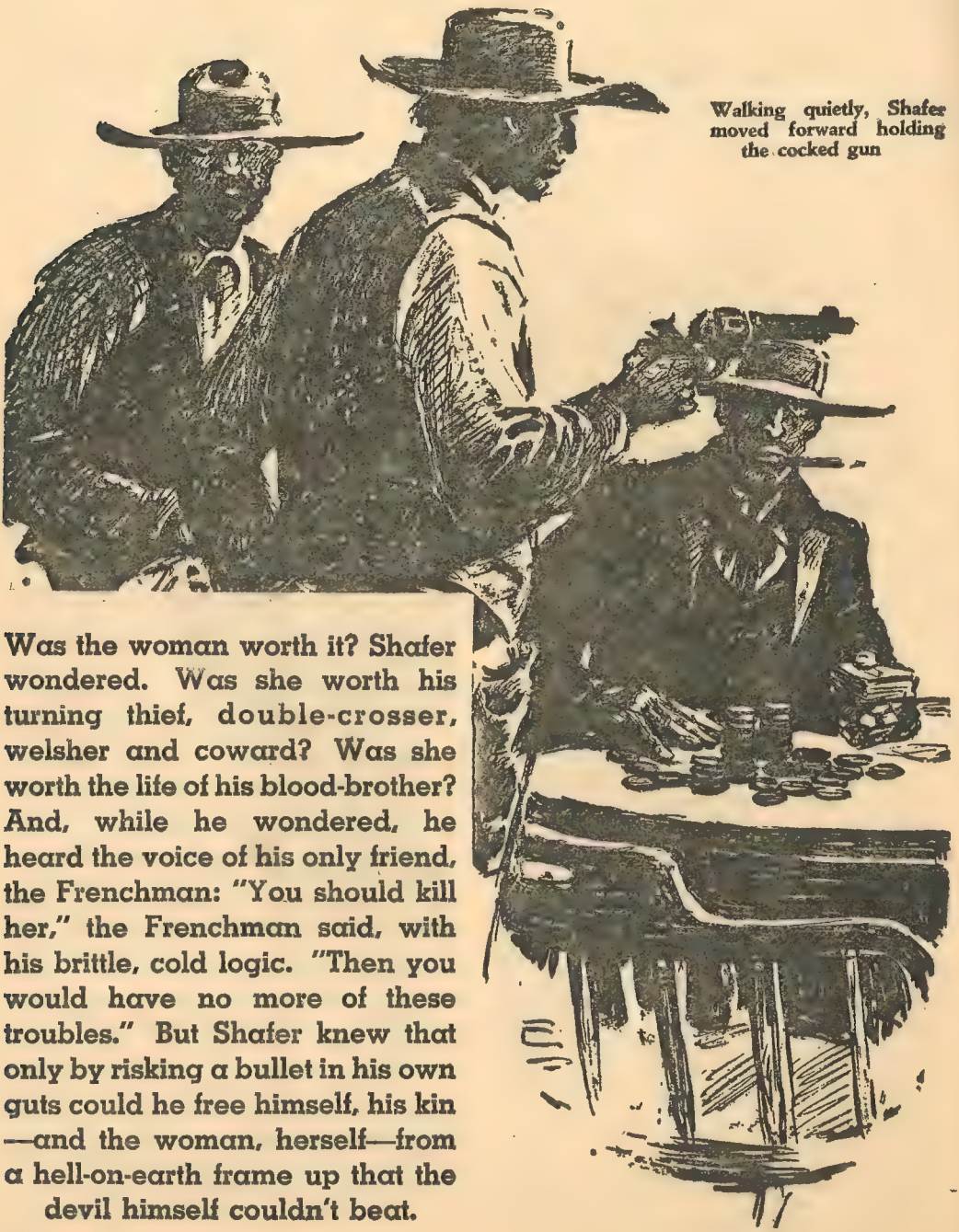
Kelso snarled, "I see you've got the money from my livery stable safe. Yeah, I'll take it."

"That wasn't the present I meant, Morg. But you can take it, too." Callahan swung the weighted sack with savage force, square against Kelso's chest. Kelso grunted and rocked backward, reaching for his gun. He was off balance when the two explosions sounded. He never even saw the Deacon

(Please turn to page 97)

BOOTHILL'S BLOODY

Gripping Novel of the Old West



Walking quietly, Shafer moved forward holding the cocked gun

Was the woman worth it? Shafer wondered. Was she worth his turning thief, double-crosser, welsher and coward? Was she worth the life of his blood-brother? And, while he wondered, he heard the voice of his only friend, the Frenchman: "You should kill her," the Frenchman said, with his brittle, cold logic. "Then you would have no more of these troubles." But Shafer knew that only by risking a bullet in his own guts could he free himself, his kin —and the woman, herself—from a hell-on-earth frame up that the devil himself couldn't beat.

BROTHERHOOD

By
JOHN C. CUNNINGHAM

CHAPTER ONE

No Guts for a Killing

DIRECTLY across the dust-choked, teeming street from the marshal's office, where Joe Shafer stood looking out his window and slowly rubbing his star, a crowd was gathering about the doors of Lavery's Palace, the cowtown's big-

gest saloon. The Palace's swinging doors were barred shut, but the throng jammed against them, struggling to peer inside. From the big, brand new Drover's Hotel next to Lavery's Palace, more men—cattle-drivers, big-hatted owners and foreman—poured down the boardwalk to join the crowd.

"Oh, my God," the little man beside Joe wailed, "they all know about it. Oh, why in hell did your fool brother have to do it? Manion'll be here in a minute and find his son dead, and there you stand like a stuffed Indian doing nothing, with all hell set to bust loose. He'll kill Mark and you. He'll kill me, too, because I'm the mayor. He'll burn the damned town." He rubbed his forehead desperately.

"Shut up," Shafer said placidly. "Shut up and let me think."

The third man in the room, a yellow-faced Frenchman in a white apron, watched the mayor impassively. In the corner stood a girl, her eyes frightened, her hands tightly gripping the white apron she wore. In the silence, the bawl of ten thousand cattle rolled up from the railroad sidings, making pandemonium with the crash of shunting cars and the howl of switch-engines.

The crowd turned from the saloon doors and expectantly watched a heavy wagon bruising its way toward the saloon through the crush of traffic.

"It's all your fault!" the mayor suddenly yelled at Joe, turning and pacing crazily up and down. He turned and faced Shafer. "I can't have it! Damn it, I'm mayor of this town," he cried, almost rising on his toes. "*I* put that star on your chest. Who the hell do you think you are, protecting your brother after he killed the son of my best customer?"

Shafer stood still, staring at the crowd. It was a typical trail-end crew, full of edgy cowhands, tight-nerved as cats after three months on trail, and as wild as the cattle they drove. In a fit of rage, the little mayor jumped at Shafer and grabbed his arm. Shafer turned and looked down at him gravely.

"I can't have it!" the mayor screeched. "You're ruining my town, you and your damned honesty! The hell with honesty! You got to make Colonel Manion happy, that's what. Manion's a big man, I tell you! He's the biggest cattle driver in Texas. He comes to my town and gives me his business, and his friends' business. This town depends on him and his friends. Suppose he goes to Deadwood instead? I give him special freight rates to get his trade, and what do you do?" He shook Shafer's arm furiously. His men come in here and want to shoot the works. They've been on the trail for three months, and what do they find? You've shut the town down cold, that's what! No gambling, no girls, no nothing! And all you do is throw them in the clink cause some old woman doesn't want them shooting and drinking. And Colonel Manion raises hell with me about it." He paused for breath.

"Take it easy, Lovell," Joe said smoothly.

"Do you call that being fair with me, Joe?" Lovell began again. "I can't buck Manion. He's got to be lord and master or he ain't happy. You got to make him happy."

Joe blinked once and raised his eyebrows. "He's not my lord and master as long as I'm marshal. The hell with these Godalmighty Texans that have to run everything. If they want to kill old women, they can do it in Texas, not Kansas."

"That's not the point!" Lovell cried indignantly. "Now Manion's own son comes in for a good time, and your brother shoots him dead over some damn woman. And you got your brother safe in jail, and won't do anything." He turned away, panting.

"What do you want me to do?" Joe asked. His voice was soft. "It was a fair fight."

Lovell whipped around and strode to him. "That's not the point," he said fiercely. "Fair or not, Manion's swore he'd get Mark, and if he doesn't, it'll be the end of the cattle business here. It's his honor, he says—his honor. You've got to throw Mark out on the street and let him take his chances. Any you've got to let Manion's boys have their way. Damn it, Joe, I made you marshal and you got to do what I say."

SHAFER looked at him soberly. "The hell with you and your dirty business," he said slowly. "If you want to save a fight, you go talk Manion out of it. I only care about one thing—to get Mark out of this safe and do my duty to this town."

Lovell looked at him helplessly, his

rheumy eyes shining with tears. "You could at least get Mark out of town."

Shafer sighed. "If I could do that, I'd quit myself. You know he won't leave."

Lovell sniffed and turned toward the door. "You and Mark and that damned woman. I wish to God you were all dead."

"You got a good chance at that wish, friend," Joe said.

Lovell went out, slamming the door so hard that dust billowed off the walls.

Across the street, the heavy wagon had heaved to a stop in front of the Palace. A big man on the hard seat glowered at the traffic. His big hands were clenched on his thighs. Lovell scuttled across the street and stood nervously at the tail-gate. The big man heaved off the seat and, pushing Lovell aside, lumbered across the boardwalk, shoving his way through the crowd into the saloon. Six riders rode up to the rail, jostling tied horses out of the way. They swung down together like a team, all with the taut, quick movements of men at once angry and disciplined. Lovell jumped backward out of the way. In a tight body they followed Manion in.

"They look like business, Frenchy," Joe said.

Behind him, in the dark rear of the office, the Frenchman laughed shortly. He let go of the coffe pot he had been holding and wiped the palms of his hands on his apron, drawing them roughly over the row of cartridges hidden in the belt around his waist. "Sure, lots of business today."

Quick, light steps crossed the floor as the girl came out of the corner. She stood beside Joe and looked across at the saloon, her eyes wide. "They're coming to kill Mark and you."

Joe lifted his eyebrows and half turned. "I guess that's the idea, kid."

"Why can't you get him out of town?"

"Listen, Alice, I've tried everything. If I'd have been a good-looking woman I'd have—" He broke off. Across the street, in a French window opening on the Drover's Hotel veranda roof, a woman appeared and stood looking down at the crowd. She was directly across the jammed street from the marshal's window, above his level, but in plain view.

"Or if *I* had been prettier," Alice said in a low voice, looking up at the woman. "She's so pretty. I don't blame Mark exactly. If I'd have been prettier, then—"

"Don't worry, kid," Joe said. "I'll get him back for you. That's part of my idea."

She hurried out into the street, crying to herself.

"*Bien,* we do what we can," the Frenchman said. "You and me and twenty thousand angels." He came out of the shadows. "There's fourteen guns over there, and we got four only, you and me."

Manion's riders came out of the saloon, carrying a body. There was brown blood on the white face, and more in the yellow hair. The wagon drove off with it. With grief and fury fighting in his face, Manion let another man take his arm and gently lead him toward the hotel. Lovell seized his other arm and began jabbering urgently.

The six riders came back, ranged themselves around Manion and stared fixedly at the marshal's office.

"I don't think Lovell's getting anywhere," Joe said. "I'll give them three more minutes." Behind the woman in the window above, he saw a shaft of sunlight striking down, silhouetting her and setting her hair on fire. The Frenchman marked his glance and smiled. "Typical," he sneered. "Anglo-Saxon. Illogical. The Frenchman would be more logical. First of all, he would take care of the business, then he would look to the woman. The English, they are so romantic, so hot-bloody."

"Sure," Joe said, staring.

The Frenchman went to the rear of the room, shrugging, and felt the coffee pot. He took a sip of coffee and stared up at the woman.

"I guess they're figuring out what they're going to do," Joe said. "They'll have something cooked up, and it'll be good."

"It would make a nice shot from here," the Frenchman said, the line of his thin, dead-colored lips just slightly curving. "A very nice shot."

Joe started slightly, his right shoulder hunching and his hand dropping an inch toward his gun. "Who?" he asked, a little bewildered. "Where?"

"Her."

The other turned slowly and looked at the Frenchman steadily and keenly. "Lily? Are you crazy?"

The Frenchman smiled a little. "You should shoot her right in the belly from here," he said. "Then you would have no

more of these troubles. Then Mark would leave town. Puncture her. Then all this problem would vanish."

THE other's mouth tightened. His gray eyes stared at the Frenchman. "Sometimes I think you're just too damn French."

"Logical, no?"

"Snakes for brains. Nothing but wet-bellied Louisiana snakes."

"But logical, yes. The rational solution. Shoot her."

"Shut up, you damn frog." The lips were a little parted and drawn back, just showing the edges of white, set teeth. The eyes were hot, hurt and bewildered. He got them clear with an effort and they were hotter. "They should have hanged you in that seminary before they kicked you out. I should have left you alone. I should never have bothered with you."

"Sure, Joe." Frenchy shrugged. "I cannot help my weaknesses." He stood looking sorrowful and pitiable, his palms open. "I know I am bad. But for you I am still a friend. You know that, Joe. Has she not hurt you enough in New Orleans? Is there no justification?"

"Shut up!" There was fury fighting in Shafer's face, and his voice was high and sharp as the report of a rifle. The Frenchman's blank expression changed, leaving his face white and frightened. "Sure, sure, Joe."

The other was looking at the floor, his face tight. "Don't ever bring that up. Never again."

"Excuse me, Joe," the Frenchman said hurriedly.

Joe looked up at him. "Listen," he said. "I don't care what she is. I know what she is. For two cents I'd kick this whole show over and get the hell out of here and take her back to the old life. There's nothing here that makes it worth it, nothing. For two cents I'd take her back to New Orleans and let the whole damned shooting match go up in a blue haze. The hell with this!"

He walked across the room, fast. "The hell with this job. Let my stinking little brother take care of himself. To hell with him and Lily!" He stood at the window, his shoulders hunched. "For what I want to do, I'd beat hell out of Mark and go over and gun that stinker Lavery and take her back and the devil take the stinking mess."

The pallor eased out of the Frenchman's face and he again watched Joe narrowly. "Just like your father."

The other's stiff shoulders slumped and his fists relaxed. He stood for a moment and then turned, and now there was nothing in his face. His eyes went coldly, directly to a heavily-framed tintype portrait on the wall behind the Frenchman, and as they looked at the proud face, the daring, genial eyes, frozen forever within the frame, a hard sneer grew on his mouth.

"Like hell," he said in a small voice. "Not like that son." His cool, scornful eyes went over the row of medals on the big, uniformed chest. "The rotten punk ran off with some woman and left my mother to hoe corn for Mark and me. Not a slave to her name. She told me when she died. I thought he was dead. He's living with her in Jamaica."

The Frenchman looked surprised. "General Shafer? You mean the General?"

"General Shafer, the stinking, deserting hound. Every time I feel like quitting my job, I look at him. Every time I feel like telling Mark to go to hell with his scrapes, I look at him."

He turned slowly back to the window. "You'd better go on in the jail and feed the kid, Frenchy. Tell him everything's fine. Everything's under control." He was again staring up at the opened French window, looking at the hand that held the edge of the drape, the white, round arm.

"You better not look at her," the Frenchman said with the edge of his voice. "Maybe I got kicked out of the seminary, but I learned some things. Do not look at her."

"I've got to. I'm going to see her later. She's meeting me out of town."

"You are a fool," Frenchy said quietly. "Why?"

"To try to get her to go away with the kid. I've got to. I've got to make some appeal."

"You are a fool," the Frenchman repeated quietly. "Women have no honor. They love only themselves, even when they love someone else." His face and his voice were like ice. "Lavery and the rest—they are just waiting for something like this. It needs only a woman like her to bring you down to where they can get you. You cannot argue with her. Shoot her."

This time it brought a quick smile to

Joe's face. "Go on and get some coffee, you damn frog. I'll feed the kid. Get out of here."

"Don't swear at me too much."

"All right, Frenchman." Across the street, on the hotel porch, the three men had finished their discussion and were standing looking across at his building. "They're coming over. Go on over and get some hot coffee."

"With arsenic?"

"Not now. Maybe later."

The Frenchman shuffled out of the office, leaving the door open. The three on the veranda watched him weave through the increasing traffic, staring steadily and suspiciously until he vanished through the half-glassed door of his little cafe alongside the hotel. Then they slowly came down the steps and began to cross the street the way he had come.

JOE'S eyes drifted over them, noting the two gun-butts wagging under the unbuttoned coat of the big man; his eyes passed over the little man idly, and went to the third. There was a slight bulge under the left breast of his smooth, black frock-coat, near the armpit; another, smaller one, on the inside of his left leg, close up under the knee.

As the heavy boots stamped up the steps from the boardwalk outside, he moved swiftly to the coffee pot and raised it calmly, poured in the cold full cup and poured a second, steaming one.

The brightness from the door suddenly shrank. He turned without haste and smiled at the big silhouette. "Sit down, Colonel. I was expecting you."

"I want none of that, Shafer," the other said, his voice seeming not to come out of his mouth, but to sound deeply from his big chest, filling the whole room with its slow, rumbling quietness. "You're no marshal. You've played this town for a sucker long enough. You're nothing but a cover for your brother's crazy fights. I want just one fair answer to one question, and that's all. Are you going to hang him legally, or let him out where my men can do it on their own?"

"That's a mighty fine speech you made up, Colonel. Sit down, won't you?" The spry little man was jittering in the door behind the big one. "Good morning, Mayor," Joe said. "Sit down, Mayor, sit down, Colonel."

The white of the Frenchman's apron flashed beyond the door, coming across the street from the chop house. "There's good hot coffee coming. Sit you down and have a good cup of coffee and we'll talk this thing over. I'll give you your answer when I get back from feeding him, Colonel."

Manion took three steps and stood in front of Joe. "I want it now, Shafer."

"I don't know it yet, Colonel."

The Frenchman lurched up the steps, hanging onto a heavy pot of coffee, and wedged through the door sideways.

"Pour the gentlemen some coffee, Frenchy," Joe said. "Mr. Lavery will like your coffee," he said as the man in black came in from the porch. "He's from New Orleans too."

"Yes, sir," the Frenchman said.

Lovell sat down on the edge of a chair and perched there, twitching. "Relax, Colonel," he said shrilly. "A little relaxation will do us all good." He hiccoughed.

Joe picked up the tin food dish and the smaller pot. The three sat looking at him with eyes so hard they hurt. Shafer turned quietly, careful not to slop the pot, pushed the jail door open with his toe and went out.

A faint, cool breeze blew toward him along the wooden floor of the hall connecting the stone jail with the office. He stopped in front of the heavy wooden cell door and twisted it open with a key. Inside, a man sat on a low, rough bed made of two-by-fours and old Army ticking. He looked up at Joe and grinned humorlessly. Joe set the food on the floor beside the bed. "Happy birthday," he said to the dirty, drawn, savage face below him. "Happy birthday and many happy returns of the day if not the circumstances." He grinned.

"The hell with that. Where's my guns, Joe?"

"I'll let you out of here in a hurry. Manion's outside with six of his Texas buckaroos. I've got them stalled just long enough for you to get out and hide. But first I've got a proposition." He sat down on the end of the bed.

AS THE office door closed behind Joe, Manion cursed softly to himself. The three pairs of eyes switched to the Frenchman. When Frenchy finished pouring the

coffee, he went out, leaving them sitting in silence, and hurried around the building.

The man in black got up and went to the jail door, looked down the empty hall and closed it again. At the other end of the hall, out of sight behind the back door, the Frenchman waited until the office door closed. Then he tiptoed down the hall to it and stood listening.

Beyond the door, Lavery turned around and sat down again.

"This isn't going to do any good, Colonel," he said wearily, sitting indolently in the chair, one arm hanging over the back. "You can't do anything with Shafer. He won't hang his own brother. Anyway, it was a fair fight. You'll have to use my plan. If you try to take them out the front, you'll suffer too much. You'll have to use their weakness, like I said."

"I don't like your ideas, Lavery," the big man said. "I don't like that way of doing things. I'd rather fight him in the open."

"If you really meant that, you would have done it already."

"But the kid hasn't got any money."

"I'll take care of that."

"What makes you so sure it'll work? What makes you so sure the kid'll stay in town? I tell you this, Lavery. I want no slips. I want that man's life, by God, and I'm going to get it! I don't want any slips."

"He'll stay in town as long as Lily does. And Lily will stay in town till I tell her to go," Lavery said.

"If he doesn't fight, he'll hide," Manion growled.

"The kid and me are pals. I introduced him to Lily."

The colonel frowned troubledly at the toes of his boots. "It's a dirty way to do it."

"Is it any dirtier than killing your son last night?"

Manion's face grew heavier. He looked up. "No, by God, it isn't!" He stood up. "The hell with this! The hell with you, Lovell, and your damned talking! Lavery, I'll meet you in your place." He started for the door.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Lovell wailed, raising his hands in appeal. "I thought we were going to talk to Shafer first. Is this justice?"

Manion turned from the door and glared. "Shut up. You can't ride the fence with me. Either you go my way or I'll send the cattle trade through Deadwood. I came over here as you asked and now I'm going." He strode out, leaving the door open.

Lovell wilted. He looked cautiously at Lavery. "Listen, between you and me, if Joe leaves your tables alone, you don't care about killing him, do you?"

Lavery shrugged. "If he leaves my tables alone."

"I'll fire him. In spite of everything, Joe's my friend. Maybe he'll leave town."

Lavery smiled. "He won't fire, Lovell. It's got to be my way. Then Manion does as he likes, I can run my place as crooked as I like, and you can open your cribs again. We've got to get rid of him, and now's the time to do it. Personally, I'm damned glad Mark killed Manion's boy. We'll get rid of them both."

Lovell hiccoughed again, and then retched slightly.

CHAPTER TWO

Brand of Cain

MARK bit into the cold ham and chewed stolidly.

"Ever since she got here," Joe said, weighing each word, "you've been in trouble. Last night was the windup. You've got to get out of town."

Mark swallowed slowly. "I don't need your protection," he said dully, staring across the cell at nothing. "Let me out of here and give me my guns."

"That's what I mean. Ever since she came, you've been like that. Like something was gnawing at your ribs from inside. Like last night. She's poison for you, Mark."

The other switched around suddenly on the bed. "How do you know what she's like? You've never even met her."

"I don't want to meet her. I don't want to know her."

"Then leave her out of it. I know how to fix things. Where's my twenty thousand? That's all I want. Then her and me'll go away."

"You'll go and lose it to Lavery trying to turn it into forty thousand. No, Mark. I'll send it to you."

Mark looked at him sharply. "What's the game? You know I'm due to get it today. I'm twenty-one now, this minute, and

I'll be damned if you'll hold out any longer."

"I can hold out till midnight. I can do that much for you."

Mark's face was hard and all fatigue gone, his eyes wide and hot on his brother's. "If you'd given me that money when I asked you I could have cleaned up on Lavery's tables and Lily and I would have been the hell out of this town long ago."

Joe smiled wryly. "You'd have been broke, and she'd have tossed you over like a—"

Mark jumped to his feet and slapped his brother across the mouth, hard. "You dirty, lying—" He stood there, blazing. His fists were doubled at his sides and he trembled.

Joe sat still, looking at the floor, his left cheek dark red. Blood ran from a fingernail cut near his eye. His left hand, holding the edge of the bed-tick, was white at the knuckles. He sat stiff, not breathing, his mouth moving.

Mark stood still, his eyes glaring. After a moment he let his breath out and breathed again naturally. Slowly the heat died out of his face. "I'm sorry, Joe. I'm sorry as hell. You come mighty close to saying the same thing that Manion's son said last night, Joe." He took one step toward his brother and leaned down slightly. "Listen, Joe," he said, almost humbly. "I'm sorry, but I love Lily. There isn't a damn thing I wouldn't do for her. She's the loveliest thing I ever saw. You just don't know her, that's all."

Joe's face was stiff as a mask. "That's right. I don't know her. What did the kid say?" He wiped the trickle of blood from his cheek.

"He said she was a—He said she'd do anything for money except give a man his money's worth. And a couple of other things."

Joe's eyes lifted slightly and a cynical smile hardened one side of his mouth. "And he got shot for that."

"You're damned right he got shot for that."

"What happened to Alice? The little waitress at Frenchy's you were so crazy about? I thought you were going to use your money to buy her a ranch. You were all set to get married till Lily came along."

Contempt crossed Mark's face. "I guess I've grown up a little since then."

"You get out of town and I'll send the money to you."

"I'm not leaving without her and the money."

JOE looked steadily at the wall, his face set. "Listen, Mark, I've given up a lot to take care of you. You don't know anything about my business in New Orleans, when I was there and you were in Kentucky with mother. But I left plenty. When she was dying and wrote me to come back to Kentucky, I left everything to keep an eye out for you, because she asked me to. I didn't give it up for nothing. Not to see you waste yourself."

Mark flushed. "Mind your own damned affairs."

"I promised mother. I won't run out on that. We got running blood in the family, Mark. I won't give you the money and see you make a running ass out of yourself. Mother didn't leave it to you for that."

Mark's mouth curled. "What running blood? Mother never quit and neither did father. Did he run at Chapultepec?"

"No. I guess he was a good officer."

"You guess? He was the finest officer that ever lived. If he hadn't died, he'd have been the best general in the Confederacy and you know it."

"All right. He would have. Listen, kid, let's you and me blow out of here and find another town. Between the two of us, we've about wore this one out. I've got to keep the marshal's job 'cause it gives me top hand to back you up. And as long as I keep the marshal's job, I've got to do it straight. And doing it straight's getting a little impossible. Lovell don't want it straight."

Mark's eyes narrowed on him. "You might let it run a little crooked."

Joe looked back at him steadily. "That's not in our line, Mark, and you know it. You don't mean that."

Mark's eyes dropped. "No." His face flushed slightly. "I know I don't. I've always looked up to you, Joe, and I don't want to see the day I have to look down. No, I didn't mean that. But I'm not leaving."

"All right, Mark. I can't fight a woman." Joe went to the door and stood eyeing Mark carefully. "Listen, Mark. Suppose somebody was to take Lily away from you, what would you do? You'd clear out then,

wouldn't you? You'd get out damned fast?"

Mark looked up, surprised, and then smiled. "Hell, nobody could. She loves me, Joe. It's that way."

"Sure. But suppose somebody did?"

The smile on Mark's mouth died and he looked with slowly darkening face at his brother's boots. "I'd kill him. If they got out of town, I'd follow them. Oh, go to hell, Joe. She isn't that kind." The dark look passed and the smile came back. "She isn't that kind. She's the loveliest, sweetest woman that ever lived."

Joe looked at the floor. "Okay, Mark. I'll leave the back door open. Stay out of sight."

"I'm going over to Lavery's."

"You haven't any money and I won't give you any. I said stay out of sight."

"Listen, Joe, quit giving me the kid stuff. I'll do as I damned well please."

Joe looked at him for a long moment. "I know what's going to happen. The way things are going, we're both riding for a fall. I ought to pull out and let you take it alone. For the last time, Mark, leave town with me now. Leave her."

Mark looked back at him. "I can't help you any, Joe. If you want to keep on backing me up, that's up to you. You can leave, but I can't."

Joe nodded slowly. "We'll see." He backed out and closed the door quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

New Orleans Backtrail

THE Frenchman was standing at the end of the hall, listening at the crack of the office door. He saw Joe and beckoned, then changed his mind and tiptoed down the hall toward him.

"They have some plan to get you and Mark together. I don't know what. But if you quit, all will be good. If you leave town, all will be good. Otherwise. . . ."

Shafer blinked at the door. "Is that so?" he said finally. "A sneak plan. That sounds like Lavery. Well, the kid's safe out of that place as long as he's broke. Couldn't you hear the details?"

"They didn't mention any."

"I've got to get him him out of town, Frenchy. Can you get a message to Lily, quick?"

"Sure. I send Alice. She will love that. She take a message up there. A billet doux?"

"Tell Lily to hurry it up. I want to meet her in half an hour, not around noon. Three miles out on the Abilene road, where the bridge crosses the river. Half an hour from now."

The Frenchman looked at him. "Listen. You love her. All right, you take her away from here. Then Mark will leave too. He will follow you with the bloodhound."

The skin around Joe's mouth whitened. "Shut up. I'm not looking for a fight with Mark. Get out of here and give her the message."

"What if you do cross him up? Are you such a big hero to him it would break his heart? And so what anyway? Must he not learn about women?"

"Shut up and give her the message, you damned frog! Do as I tell you."

The Frenchman heaved up his shoulders and sighed through his liver-colored lips. "Damn' Frenchman. That's all I am." He raised his eyebrows hopelessly, turned and went silently down the hall toward the back door.

Joe entered the office, smiling. He saw Manion's empty chair and the smile died.

"I told him the answer, Joe," Lavery said. "He thought you'd scare and turn Mark over or something."

"Thanks," Joe said drily.

Lovell hiccoughed and shifted a little nearer the edge of his chair, sitting with his hands on the seat beside his narrow rump. "Joe, I'm going to suggest something, and not only for my good, but also for yours. Things are getting pretty hot."

"No," Joe said. "I'm sorry, but I can't quit."

Lovell's face suddenly sharpened and his eyes grew hard and tired. "Then let me put it this way, Joe," he said in a louder voice. "I'm sick and tired of the way things are running. You're fired. You'll meddle no more with Lavery's tables, and you'll meddle no more with anything else in this town."

"Such as your cribs? You can't fire me, Mayor. If you do, the townspeople'll toss you out on your ear, and then where's your cattle shipping business? I'm the only man that's been able to keep the cowhands from shooting the roofs off the houses, and if

you fire me, you'll be eating ticks off Manion's cows for a living. That leaves me marshal. And as marshal, I've got to stick to the line I laid down when I started. No cribs, no crooked gambling. If I backed down from that one inch, every gun-heavy punk I've tossed out of town would think I was yellow and they'd try me again—all at once. I can't afford to ease up. Thanks for the thought, though."

"You're too rigorous, Joe. Too rigorous for your own good."

Joe looked beyond Lovell to the big, framed tintype on the wall. "Yeah, he said. "Yeah, I guess maybe I am, maybe."

"Why?" Lavery asked, suddenly leaning forward. "You used to be different, Joe. Why the change?"

Shafer looked steadily at the face of his father behind the dusty glass. "Something I heard." He looked away out of the window. "Or maybe it was something I et. I don't remember which."

Something soured Lovell's mouth. "All right, Joe. Nobody can help a stubborn man." He turned abruptly and went out.

LAVERY sat still, watching Shafer quietly. The sun shone in through the window, across the neat black of his frock coat which was already beginning to collect dust from the churn of traffic outside.

"Joe, has Lily got anything to do with all this?"

"Lily who? All what?"

"Let's cut it out, Joe. You and me are friends. The colonel and the mayor aren't here now. We can talk. What's got into you? You and Lily and I used to have some pretty good times together on some of those parties, didn't we? We made plenty of money together, didn't we? What happened to you when you went up to Kentucky?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me. This town is good only as long as the cattle traffic lasts and the railroad's being built. And I'm going broke. I came up here 'cause I heard you were marshal and it would be a good thing. The end of it is I can't make a dime out of this town with you bucking me."

"Yeah. I guess that hurts you 'cause it hurts our friendship."

Lavery's face looked a little hurt and he turned his face toward the window. "I could do you a favor, Joe. Manion's got a setup all arranged for you and Mark. He's out to get you both."

"Go ahead, friend. What's the setup?"

"You know me, Joe. I'll do you a favor, any old time."

"You mean I'm supposed to leave your tables alone. Your nice new wheels that I haven't shot holes in yet. The ones with the little gadgets in them that tell your fortune for you. The answer is no. The kid thinks I'm honest. I'm staying that way to give him something decent to hang onto."

"What the hell is this?" Lavery's face was a little tighter, his voice hardly raised. "Are you just playing the damn' hero for his benefit? Am I losing my shirt just for a punk—" His voice died and he relaxed. "I'm trying to be reasonable, Joe. Just reasonable."

"Then say something reasonable, like how is Manion setting up to do his murders?"

"Are you going to come over there and bust up those tables, like you said?"

"Busting your tables is business. You telling me about the colonel is friendship. Let's not get them mixed up."

"I guess Lovell was right. You can't do anything for a stubborn man."

Joe looked at the row of medals on the puffed-out chest, blurred in the shadow. "Lavery, I want you to tell Lily to pack her things up and leave town with the kid. If you do that, I'll quit and leave your tables alone."

Lavery slowly stiffened all over. "What kind of a gag is that?"

"You tell her. She's working for you."

"In the first place," Lavery said, his voice quiet and serious, "Lily is too valuable to me. She brings more suckers into that place than all the girls together, even if she doesn't give them more than the eye. In the second place, she wouldn't go anyplace with the kid. The only reason she came up here at all was because you were here."

"Me?" Joe's face tightened momentarily, and then relaxed except for a small twitching in one side of his jaw. "Yeah? And what's the real reason you won't?"

"The third reason," Lavery went on, talking now still softly, but through set teeth and unmoving lips, "is that if that kid brother of yours doesn't lay off of her pretty

soon, I'm going to make him lay off."

Shafer looked at him curiously for a moment. "Is that right," he said. "I always thought you and Lily was just kind of friends."

"We are," Lavery said, his voice trying to sound easy. "I want it to stay that way. Just that way."

"I get you," Joe said. "Even if you can't get to first base, you want to keep on striking out, is that it?"

Lavery's face turned cold. "Yes," he said, his voice dry and strained. "Something like that. Something like that."

"And so," Joe said softly, "if I was to make a play for her myself, you wouldn't like that, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"That's too bad."

Lavery flushed to his eyes. He stood up and looked down at Joe steadily. "Listen, Joe. Your kid brother's in love with Lily. Suppose I tell him about you and her in New Orleans? All about the big secret?"

Joe's voice was silky. "There's nothing to tell."

Lavery smiled coldly. "He might not believe that. Suppose I tell him what kind of business we were in down there, that you've kept so secret? What'll he think of your honesty then? How about the gun-running to South America?"

JOE stood up, his eyes flaming. Lavery shrank away from him. "Listen," Joe whispered. "I sweat blood to keep Mark and my mother from finding out about that. That's past. He knows nothing about me and New Orleans. If you ever tell. . . ." His hands clenched.

"I see," Lavery said. "Stay away from my place." He turned and walked stiffly out, almost bumping the Frenchman.

Shafer looked up, his face controlled again. "Will she be there like I said?"

"Oh, yes. Are you going to run away with her, like I said?"

"I'll never run from anything."

"Your father, eh? Still on the brain? It is what they call the obsession. I am tired of your father. What has all this history to do with a louse of the better class, like myself?"

"Maybe a man who broke his vows wouldn't care much about promises. I promised my mother to take care of Mark. So I'm supposed to run off with Lily, bust his heart and my promise, and have to fight him, to boot. Then I could hang my own picture on the wall and look at it any damn time I pleased."

"Could it be that every time you hate that picture, you hate yourself? You are so scared of running, is it yourself you see there?"

"Shut up!" Joe said, his face a dead mask.

"Oh, yes."

They stood looking at each other, quietly, neither with expression. "Permit this clarification, my friend," the Frenchman said. "Either shoot this woman now, or else run away with her as you want to. You cannot be honorable and her lover at the same time."

"I'm not her lover. I never was."

"Don't beat the bush. In the heart, it is so. You wish to love her and at the same to time be honorable. A man of strict honor would kill her. Do you think I did not see you and her in New Orleans all those months? You ran away from her then. You are hiding from her ever since she came here. You are merely pusillanimous, that is all. That is a big word the priests use meaning lacking the guts of a chicken."

Joe smiled. "I might have expected that from you. Do you know just what you are?"

"Oh, yes. A damned Frenchman. In addition, they should have hanged me before they disposed of me from the seminary and we became friends—and you debased me with your reformations and turned me from a great crook to a stinking frycook."

Joe grinned. "If I don't have any luck with Lily, we're going to have to do a little fighting. Take your apron off and leave it off. Your guns aren't handy."

The Frenchman's liver-colored lips parted and his teeth showed in a smile. "I do not expect to see you ever again. She will abscond you and you will retire to her parlor, where you will—"

"Shut up!" Joe got up and went for his hat. The Frenchman almost salaamed. "But *certainement.*"

SHE was sitting on the new spring grass, her back arranged against the smooth gray, water-worn bole of a dead cottonwood, fifty yards from where he had told

her to meet him by the river. A bay hunter with a green plush sidesaddle on its back nipped delicately at the new grass, as though it were violets.

He swung slowly down and dropped his nag's reins over its head and stood looking at her.

Down below him the snow-water rushed over the stones in the river bed, and the silence of the thin, sweet air coming through the fragile, budding twigs of the willows was like cotton in his ears, shutting off the memory of the brawling town. The mountains looked a million miles away, and there was nobody in between except himself and the woman on the grass.

She wasn't quite pretty. Her upper lip, with a small downward peak in the middle, was too full, pouting over the sucked-in lower one. Her chin was too short and her nose had no particular shape at all. She was short, almost stocky, and her pose against the tree trunk made her look shorter. But he didn't watch these things, but rather her eyes, which were wide, blue and mischievous, with abnormally large pupils. She was looking at him now, without speaking, her eyes wide, innocent and pure as the sky, with a smile and a long welcome in them.

"You look pretty as a picture, Lily," he said smoothly. "Pretty as a picture. What book did you see the picture in?"

Irritation shadowed her face; then the welcome was back in them. This time the innocence was a little wary.

"You shouldn't cross your legs like that," he said quietly. "They're too short." He watched her eyes darken and her upper lip pout slightly. Her eyes moved around him, as though she were trapped. She uncrossed her legs, smoothed her dark green riding habit and looked down at her feet helplessly. They were sticking straight up, like doll's feet, side by side, very prim in her shining boots.

"Why don't you sit on the log," he went on helpfully. "Then you could cross your knees so as to show off your leg, and put your elbow on your knee, and your chin on your fist, and look wistful. You could hold a flower in one hand, and a wad of hay in your mouth, for all I care. Listen, Lily, I didn't come out here to go through the old routine. I got plenty of it on the old bayous down south. I like it fine, but I know it by heart. Let's grow up and you just be you, for a change—if you can."

Her face fell, and as he watched the hurt look in it, the smooth curve of his smile died and he looked a little embarrassed. He went forward a little closer. When he was close enough, she said quietly, "That wasn't fair, Joe. You can say those things but it isn't fair. You know it isn't. It's mean."

He started to say something, and stopped, his face hardening again. He sat down on the log about four feet from her. "Listen, Lily, you should have stayed in New Orleans. I want you to go back, now, fast. You can get a rig and drive to Alibene and catch the train there."

"I came up to see you, Joe. I'm not going back. There wasn't anything in New Orleans after you left. I heard you were here, and I put the idea into Lavery's head, and when we came up here I was so happy I—Why haven't you been to see me, Joe? What's the matter with me? We used to be—"

"That sounds nice. But I've got tired of not quite believing you. Hot and cold's fine in hotel faucets, but it's hell in people, especially women."

HER face was tired for a moment, and then as she looked at the river, it brightened a little. "Why couldn't we build a little house right here, right by the side of the river? Right here; and nobody would ever come to see us."

"You know why. Because you'd be gone in about three weeks. Somebody would come riding by with about fifteen hundred silver conchos on his saddle and your eyes would get bright and your heart would turn to butter and there I'd be with one egg in the frying pan. No, thanks."

She looked at him directly, her eyes so open that he could see right through them into her heart. He moved his eyes away.

"Not with you, Joe," she said. "Why haven't you ever believed in me?"

"You've never given me any reason to. Forget it, Lily."

"Do you think I'm ugly?"

He looked at her. "No."

"Do you think I'm pretty, then?"

"Kind of. Not very."

She looked a little disappointed. "Did you mean what you said about my legs?"

"Never mind about your legs. They're all right. Your hunter has better ones, but

nobody'd love you for your legs anyway, so that's all right."

"What did you say?"

" I said your hunter—"

"I mean about love."

He sat looking at her across the four feet of log. His eyes got very careful. "Some men think they can say things like that, and not mean it, or they can take it back. They can't. I wouldn't say it unless I were going to commit myself for good, Lily, and if I committed myself, it would mean too many things. If that makes any sense."

"I know, Joe. That's why I wish you'd say it. Because you're like that. Because it would really mean something." She hesitated a moment, looking at the grass. "You mean you won't, until you trust me."

He looked at her sharply. "That's about it. I've got a certain amount of reason, too. I wouldn't know the exact figures, but I do know personally about twenty men that have been in love with you and some of them that went crazy with it. You knew it too, and you didn't do anything to discourage them much. I think the way it is, is this: you'd like to wear my scalp, but I've never let you get it. That kind of rubs you. You want my scalp so bad, it makes you think you're in love with me. But once you got it, like the others, you'd be off after somebody else."

She looked at her hands, lying in her lap, and said nothing.

"There are some women who have a gift like that. They make a career out of it. There aren't many women like that, and when they find out they've got the gift, they're so amazed at themselves they spend their whole lives just trying it out." He leaned forward a little. "Don't make a mistake, Lily. I'm just another sucker. What I'd have for you would be no different from what any other man could have."

She looked at him straight, and her eyes were grave. "But you see, the whole difference is, I didn't love them. I do love you. That's the difference."

CHAPTER FOUR

Boothill Frame

THEY sat looking at each other. The leather tan of his face slowly colored and a vein down the middle of his forehead tightened and swelled. The sun slanting down through the willows shaded softly along her cheek, making gold the fine hairs on it. He looked away from her, his lips thin, and the vein disappeared. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Meaning you'd marry me and settle down for good," he said woodenly. "That you'd forget about hogtying every other man that came along, just for fun."

Her eyes looked at him, hurt again. There was no lie in them, just soft hurt. He did not see it. "You don't have to put it quite that way."

"All right. Meaning you'd be simple and honest for a change, and just be yourself. You're lovely enough, Lily, without trying to be two or three other people at the same time."

"Yes, Joe," she said softly. "I'd be myself. Maybe that's the only way I can ever be just myself, with you."

He looked at her without expression. "Just the way you're yourself with Mark. I guess he thinks the same things I do. Maybe he even said the same things." His eyes were still expressionless and hard as file-steel.

She looked at him uncomprehending for a moment.

"I want you to go away with Mark. As soon as you get back to town."

She burst into laughter. "Oh, Mark. I don't want anything from Mark. He's just a baby, Joe. Why bring him up? What a ridiculous idea."

He sat looking at her quietly. Her under lip quivered once. "Don't go away, Joe. Don't go away like that. Don't look so hard."

"Sure," he said. "You'd like to get married and settle down. Just as long as you can keep Mark or somebody around for a plaything. Just to fill up your idle moments."

She flushed. "I haven't done anything with Mark. Don't you dare insinuate—"

"I don't mean that. I never said you were cheap. I never even said you weren't a nice girl. That's half your poison. You *are* a nice girl. Except you're greedy. You give me a lot of talk about marrying and settling down, and all the time you've got Mark on a string. I'll marry you, Lily, when you've given some proof, not just talk. Sure, Lily, I love you. I'll give you

the straight goods. I fell in love with you the first time I ever saw you, like every other soft-hearted sucker who ever saw you." He moved a little nearer along the log. "It's not that you're so beautiful, or even pretty. I suppose it's because you're so full of life and you're so warm. And maybe because you never bother to use your brains."

"Why didn't you ever tell me, Joe?" she asked, her voice soft. "We were together enough. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"The line was too long."

"Don't be a fool, Joe. Those people didn't mean anything to me."

He looked up, his face hard. "All right. You won't clear out with Mark. Then do this. Hire a rig and get Mark to drive you to Abilene and wait for the train there. The one that goes through here at six tonight. I'll meet you and we'll tell him then."

Her eyebrows went up in the center, half-frowning, half perplexed. "Why Mark? Why not tell him here?"

He was silent.

"What's behind this?"

"If you don't, he'll be killed."

"Oh. So that's it. You're using me. No. I'll go with you, not Mark."

He stood up. "All right. If Mark doesn't mean anything to you, tell him to go peddle his onions elsewhere and get yourself a steady job in a hashhouse for a year. Maybe that would bring you down to where you'd be willing to do something for other people for nothing. If you had the guts to work in Frenchy's place for six months, I'd trust you with anything."

There was a little sneer on her puffed upper lip. "Why don't you marry Frenchy?"

"He can't dance." He turned and started for his horse.

SHE stood up. "Wait a minute, Joe." He stopped at the tone of her voice and looked around, a little surprised. "I didn't come up here from New Orleans to fight with you." She came toward him and looked up at him, her face so stern it was almost funny.

"There's no use talking," he said. "Take Mark out of town, now, or nothing goes."

"I don't care anything about Mark. Joe, let's go back to New Orleans. I'm twenty-eight years old and I'm getting tired. Joe, take me, and take me back. I'm tired of being the way I am."

"You'll tell Mark he's out? I want you to hurt him. Hurt him so bad he'll hate the sight of you."

"I don't even have to tell him. We could just go. There's the train to St. Louis tonight."

"Damn it, you'll have to tell him, tell him right away. As soon as you get back to town."

"Then you will? You'll go?"

He looked at the river and slowly rubbed his cheek. "Not right away, Lily. You'll have to go ahead."

"Why?"

"He can't know it's me. He'll go crazy. He killed a man last night, to protect your honor."

"Are you afraid of Mark, Joe?"

"I haven't been afraid of anything since Vicksburg."

"Then what's holding you back?"

He stood in silence for a long moment. "I can't let him down. He's crazy in love with you, Lily. It'll be bad enough, you're sending him off, without knowing it's me that's the reason."

"I see. Or I begin to see. I'm supposed to go ahead, and you'll come later, maybe. If everything's all right with Mark, and the stableboys say it's all right with them. You simply want me to put Mark off and make him go away. That's all you want, isn't it?" Her face was pink, and she was getting ready to cry. "That's all you came out here for, isn't it? All this that you told me—that you loved me—it was just to make me put Mark off, wasn't it?"

He looked at her eyes. "No, Lily. That was the God's truth."

"Then come with me to St. Louis tonight. Promise."

He looked away. "I can't promise."

"If you love me."

"He'll follow you. Lily, if it were anybody but Mark, I'd just fight it out with him. I can't do that to Mark. I can't let him down."

"Then that would mean he couldn't ever know?"

"Not as long as he's Mark."

"Then you could never go with me?" She backed away from him a step. "Then I won't tell him, and I won't tell him to go away." Her eyes flared at him. "I'll keep

him. I'll keep him till you're ready to go with me. And that's that, Joe." She laughed at him, and the two tears in the corners of her eyes broke free and ran down her nose. "How do you like that?"

He was on her in two steps, and had her in one arm, his other hand locked under her chin. "I'll tell you how I like it, you little heathen. I don't like it worth a damn. I want you, Lily, and I love you. I want you more than anything in the world. That's the way I like it." His hand was choking her and her eyes closed. "I love you, and damn you. If you think I like this stinking situation, you're crazy. If I had my way I'd—" He stopped talking and bent his head down and kissed her. Her arms went around his neck and tightened. After a moment he lifted his head. His hand eased and his arm loosened. He was breathing heavily. She looked up at him.

"Oh, Joe, let's go! Let's not talk any more."

"For God's sake, Lily," he said, his voice thick, "if I did what I wanted, do you think I'd hold back? It'd be you and me and the hell with the rest."

"Joe, give me your promise. I'll tell Mark."

"For God's sake, I can't run away and smash everything to hell. Lily, make him get away from you and leave town. Break his heart, but make him leave."

"Give me your promise."

"Lily—"

"No, I won't do it. I won't lose you, Joe. He's the one hold I've got over you."

He looked at her, his face as dead as stone.

"Come to me when you'll promise me, Joe. Then I'll let him go. As it is, you love him more than you do me."

"I love some things more than I do you. Not necessarily him." He turned toward his horse. He picked up the reins and turned toward her again. "You're leaving town, Lily. I'm going to have the hotel clerk get your ticket. I'm telling Mark you'll meet him at Abilene. He'll ride ahead."

She looked at him blankly. "I'm not leaving town, Joe."

"You're leaving town if I have to whip you onto that train."

"Lavery won't like that."

"I never cared much what Lavery liked." He turned and mounted. And sat quiet.

"You're crazy if you think that will work, Joe. I'll simply tell him the truth about you and me. Then you'll have to fight him. How will you like that?"

He sat his horse, his head down, his face brooding.

"Come to me when you're ready, Joe," she called, her voice light and assured. "I'll make him leave town, but not till you promise me."

Quietly he recollected himself and looked at her. His face was composed, his eyes clear, and there was just the faintest sneer on his lips. "You're riding kind of high, Lily. Watch out you don't take a spill. As for me—you'll need a hell of a lot of taking down yet," he said slowly, "before you'd make a fit wife for a poor man."

He tipped his hat to her, kicked the nag and was off at a hard run.

AS HE rode into town, heading the gray nag for the hotel, surprise lifted his eyebrows for a moment, and then his face blanked down closer than before. The noise had died out, and few wagons passed the veranda. The few men left on the porches were back by the building walls, and gathered around handy doors. The whole stretch of porch between the hotel and Lavery's Palace was bare. Nobody was coming in or out of the Palace, and there were no horses hitched before it.

He stopped at the empty hitchrail before the hotel and looked across the street at his office. There were no horses along that side of the street either. All the eyes on the veranda were looking at him. He kept his face averted, thinking, his mouth pinched and the corner of his eye twitching slightly. A door slammed somewhere, sounding loud in the quiet street.

He dismounted slowly and hitched his horse, all his movements slow and tentative, and climbed the porch steps to the veranda. He stood there, idly swinging his quirt against his leg, his eye twitching a little faster, with his back to the street. None of the men would look at him. They all seemed embarrassed.

A boot hit the bottom of the steps behind him, and he spun, his hand on the butt of his Colt, the gun half-drawn. Frenchy came up the steps, a small grin on his dark lips. Joe straightened out slowly, letting the gun

fall back. The Frenchman's apron was gone and the row of cartridges around his waist shone bright.

"Many friends have come to town," Frenchy said in a low voice. "I mean the ones you told to stay out of the town. Ever since Mark killed the colonel's boy, it has been rumors that you are through. They say you are scared—afraid—to burst the tables of Lavery. They all wait to see. Lavery has sworn to kill you if you do. He is waiting, with much help. If you go in, he kills you. If you don't, these men will think of themselves that they will be braver than you and try to kill you. Then is the great feather to their hats." He leaned a little closer to Shafer's ear. "One at a time, is all right. But ten, all at once."

Joe grinned slowly. "Don't worry about Lavery. I can fix him. Listen, Frenchy. I couldn't do anything with Lily, but as long as Mark's in hiding, he's safe." He pushed through the plate glass doors into the dark lobby of the hotel. There were a few men in the rear corners. Their talk died as he went to the curved mahogany desk.

The clerk was sorting letters into boxes out of a pack in his hand. He turned around and dropped the letters. His feet walked across them toward the desk. He leaned over it, his face white as a shadbelly. "Mr. Shafer, that man who was tearing the wall down that night, the big one you ordered out of town. He is back. I've seen others, too. You'd better—"

"Buy a ticket for Miss Furness on the train to St. Louis tonight."

"You had better— What?"

"She'll be leaving for the station at six. Send somebody up now to start packing."

"But—what—without orders from Miss—"

"Now," Joe said, leaning forward a little across the desk. "Now."

The clerk drew back. "Yes, sir."

Shafer turned from the desk and smiled at the Frenchman. "Now for business." He pulled one of his guns. One of the men in the corner stood up suddenly, as though somebody had stuck him with a pin, and stood staring, his face white, at the gun in Joe's hand. Shafer opened the cylinder port and slowly turned the loads past it. The man saw what he was doing and slowly sat down again.

JOE snapped the port closed and grinned at the Frenchman. "You find Mark and tell him he's to meet Lily at Abilene. He's to leave right away. He can get there in time to meet the train." He drew the other gun. "With him safe out of town, I'll clean up Lavery's, just for the hell of it. A little fun for a change. Some good, clean, simple fun."

"Sure," the Frenchman said. "He's in Lavery's. Gambling. They are all in there. Mark, Lavery, Manion. They are waiting for you."

Shafer's jaw dropped a quarter of an inch. He leaned back against the desk, forgetting the gun. "Huh?"

"This is the trick, the plan. It is started already. They are waiting for you."

"You're crazy. How can he gamble? He hasn't got any money."

"They do not want money now. They want you. Some I heard, some I figured out. Mark, he is bait. He signs notes for his money. He is winning."

Joe ducked his head and began examing his second gun. His hand was shaking and he fumbled the loading port. "Get him out of there," he said in a small, choked voice. "You know damned well I can't go in there with him in there. They don't dare gun me down with him alive. With both of us there, it would be just what they want."

"I know, Joe. That is the idea. I can't get him out. I tried. He was winning. He told me to go to hell. I went back. He was still winning. They told me to get out. You know how they mean."

Joe looked at him, the inspected gun hanging loosely in his hand. "Then send Alice. Tell her to tell him—"

"I did send Alice. He said she was spoiling his luck. I can't get him out as long as he is winning and Lavery is letting him win to keep him there."

The big clock at the foot of the stairs ticked heavily. The clerk had collected the spilled letters and was trying to sort them into the holes, dropping them onto the floor one by one, while he watched Joe.

Sudden fury crossed Joe's face and he stepped toward the door. The Frenchman's yellow fingers grabbed his arm and half-swung him around. He stood there, feet wide, glaring at the Frenchman.

"Now listen, friend Joseph. Here's the trick. Very simple. Once they cheat on the

deal. Second dealing, it is. Very sly, just a little, just enough so Mark will see. You understand? They argue. Then they call you for a witness. You will watch. Then again, they will cheat. Behind you, all around, are the men of the colonel. This time they cheat so Mark he has to see it. He will have to challenge. Then is the fight. Mark draws, you draw, but all are ready. You are both killed. So is the end. You see?"

"Get him out of there," Joe said.

"You are listening? If Mark does not draw, Lavery he is insult, and he shoots. So always they win. I cannot get him out of there. Again is suicide."

They heard the sound of the single horse's hoofs in the street. Joe looked around toward the plate glass windows.

He heard the light feet coming up the steps outside, then saw the perky green hat and the golden hair.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Locket

SHE pushed through the doors into the lobby. "Hello, Joseph," she cried, her eyes and her cheeks bright. "What's the matter with everybody? What's the matter with our lovely little town? Did somebody die?" She waved her crop at the clerk, who dropped all his letters, and swept by Joe, her eye mischievous and glittering and scornful. She went on up the stairs, Joe's eyes fixed on her.

"Lily!" His voice was forced.

She stopped short at the last step and turned slowly.

"Lily, I've changed my mind. I'm going to St. Louis with you. Come down here. I want you to do something in a hurry."

Her face melted into a smile, so gentle it shone, and she started down the steps again, her smile widening. He advanced and met her at the foot of the steps.

She looked up at him. "You aren't fooling me?" she asked timidly and hopefully. "This is your promise?"

He turned to the clerk. "Make that two tickets to St. Louis," he said.

She sighed and her hand took his arm. "Oh, Joe, you don't know how happy I am. What's the matter, Joe?"

"I want you to send a message and tell Mark to come to see you immediately."

"Right now? But why?"

"So you can tell him about us." There was a look on his mouth as though he had been drinking vinegar.

"Now? But can't we have dinner together? Wouldn't it be nicer if we—"

"Did he give you a ring? Anything that would be a sure sign. That would bring him in a hurry?"

"Only a little locket." Her hand dipped into her bodice and drew out a small gold and enamel heart.

"Take it off," he said, his voice as sharp and hard as splintered bone.

Her face was bewildered. But she handed him the locket.

"What's the matter with you, Joe?"

"Go upstairs and wait," he said roughly. "He'll be up in a minute."

Her face turned as meek as a little girl's. She turned and went hurriedly up the stairs, her head down.

She disappeared into the dark of the upper hall, and the lobby was dark and full of silence again, its dusty palms rotting in their glazed pottery tubs. He handed the Frenchman the locket. "You go first. I'll wait outside the door. You go in and tell him Lily wants to see him right now, that she is through with him, and wants to tell him why. Don't mention me."

"All at once, yes."

"But don't mention me, Frenchy. I don't want to fight Mark."

The Frenchman was staring at the other side of the street. "There's your big friend. The one who was tearing down the wall."

"Get going," Joe said, his lips hardly moving.

"Yes, sir. Yes, Joe. Yes, my friend. I will do anything for you." There was a little sweat on the Frenchman's forehead. "They told me not to come back, but—" The yellow hand closed tight around the locket, and the Frenchman walked toward front door.

HE FOLLOWED the Frenchman to the plate glass doors, stood looking through them at the big man across the street. His mouth tightened slightly and he shoved through onto the porch.

He turned toward the Palace. The sun was cutting down steeply under the porch roofs, turning gold with the haze of dust in

the air. He walked slowly along toward the Palace door, covertly watching one of Manion's hands standing guard beside them.

The guard moved away from the wall. He stood with his head quartered toward Joe as he came, but not looking directly, and his hands were hanging loosely at his sides. Shafer idled toward him, and as he reached the doors, slowed, faced the guard, and sat back against the hitchrail, folding his arms.

In the silence the faint *click* of chips came past the swing doors, and the low mutter of voices.

"I told you to stay out of here," a deep voice said with sudden loudness, and the mutter stopped. "Now get out." The chips were silent.

Then he heard Mark's voice. "You're a liar."

"Sure. But there is the locket."

"Get out of here," the deep voice said again. "Deal it, Lavery."

"All right," Mark said. "Just this hand. And then by God I'll find out who's lying."

"Wait a minute," the Frenchman said.

"Get out of here, you lousy garlic-eater," the voice roared.

"Mark, Mark, come now!" the Frenchman cried and the bootheels broke in a staggering tattoo. Shafer looked mildly at the guard, and the guard looked at him.

"Maybe you better go in there, Marshal," the guard said. "It's trouble."

"That big fellow across the street is gunning for me. You'll cover my back?"

The guard nodded slowly. "Sure, sure, Marshal, I'll cover your back." His eyes were bland with amusement.

"Okay," Joe said. "I guess I'll have to go in." He leaned forward, easing himself off the hitchrail. The guard's mouth opened wide as Shafer's right fist, snaking out as he lunged at him, caught him in the teeth. His eyes went up and as the right caught him again in the throat, breaking cartilage, he slid down, clawing at Shafer's thighs. Shafer drew his right gun and deftly bounced the short barrel off the guard's head. He pushed through the doors and stood aside in the shadow, breathing a little fast.

"Hold that card," Mark's voice said sharply. He heard somebody panting heavily, and then as his eyes grew used to the gloom, he saw Frenchy lying on the floor, doubled up, holding his stomach with both hands. One of the cowhands was standing over him.

"Are you challenging my deal?" Lavery asked.

At a round table Mark sat facing Lavery, his unshaven face white and cold as snow.

"Do that again," he said, his voice muffled. "Deal that card again."

"Are you questioning my honesty?" Lavery asked coolly. "Somebody get the sheriff. Let him watch my deal."

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CHAPTER SIX

Cylinders Full

THE five cowhands stood around in a rough semicircle behind Mark, fifteen to twenty feet back. The colonel stood ten feet to one side of Lavery. In the little musician's gallery high up in the back wall, another man sat looking down, covering the whole scene.

Walking quietly, Shafer went forward holding the cocked gun. "Mark," he said quietly. "Come on. You've had enough."

"This—" Mark said, and his voice died as he saw Shafer's gun.

"What did you call me?" Lavery asked, his eyes still fixed on Mark. "Shafer, come here and watch my deal."

Joe backed a step farther away from the lines of fire that converged on Mark's back.

"I saw you," Mark said.

"Nobody calls me a cheat. Joe, come over here."

"Don't anybody draw any guns," Joe said. "Colonel, I'm warning you. I know your plan. I've got you all covered. Mark, get out of there."

Mark slid his chair back from the table. "Nobody's going to deal me a hand—"

"Shut up!" Joe shouted. "You damned young fool, keep your mouth shut. You make one move for your gun, Mark, and I'll plug you." He turned to the riders around the wall. "I swear to God to kill at least three of you if you start it."

The man in the gallery moved, getting up from his chair.

"You dirty, rotten sons!" Manion suddenly shouted, "what are you waiting for?"

The man in the gallery made a sudden move, and Shafer's gun jumped in his hand, blending like one shot with the roar of the other.

"Don't move, anybody," Joe said quietly.

The gun fell from the gallery, striking the floor with a loud, hard thud.

"Come on, Mark."

The man above slowly tilted out over the little railing, and toppling slowly and gracefully, fell after the gun.

"You dirty sons!" Manion roared in a burst of fury. Not one of them moved.

Slowly Mark backed away from the table, still staring at the hole in it. Suddenly he came out of his stupor, crouched, and ran over to the Frenchman, got one of his arms around his neck and staggered with him, still bent low under Shafer's gun, toward the doors. Behind Joe, the Frenchman stood up, still bent over, his face greenish, swearing weakly in French.

Manion took three slow steps to the table and stared at Shafer as he backed carefully to the door. "Riley, get them as they come out!"

Joe smiled. "There ain't no Riley, Colonel."

"All right," the colonel said quietly. "I guess you won this one. The hell with tricks. From now on I do it my way."

"You should have done it that way in the first place," Shafer said, still smiling. "This fancy business isn't your style. Don't be in a hurry coming out of the door." He backed out. The street was empty.

"They'll be going out the back," he said to Mark. "We've got about four minutes to clear town."

Mark was staring at him, his face drawn. He held out the locket in his hand, showing it to him. "Where is she? In the hotel?"

"What's the difference? I told you she'd throw you over. Doesn't this show you? Come on, while we can."

A spasm of grief and rage passed over Mark's face. "Where is she, damn you?"

The Frenchman was leaning against the wall, his face sick and his hands at his groin. "For a fool I did this," he breathed.

"Listen, Mark, the three of us are leaving town. Lily's crossed you. You're not going to see her."

"You're wrong, Joe," Mark said. "I'm going to see her. I don't give a damn what happens, I'm going to see her." He turned and walked toward the hotel.

THE Frenchman drew a breath through his teeth. "Come on, my friend," he said, desperately laboring to smile. "You can do no more. Why wait?"

"Mark!" Joe yelled after him as he went up the steps to the hotel veranda.

"You did everything you could. He'll find out about you and Lily. This will be no fun, you and him fighting and the others after you both. Come on."

The big man had moved into the mouth of an alley, where he stood waiting. There were two others with him now.

On the veranda, Alice was shaking

Mark's arm. Mark pushed her away and went inside.

"Come on," Joe said. "You might as well be dead as the way you are."

The Frenchman swore and labored along the sidewalk after him.

"Alice," he called to the girl on the porch, "get the hell under cover." She ducked down the steps.

The lobby was cool, quiet and empty. "Frenchy, go stand in the back hall where you can see the front and the back at the same time. If you see anybody coming, either way, fire a shot." He turned and walked quickly up the stairs.

Voices came toward him down the dark upper hall. Light from an open door struck across the carpet and he slowed up, approaching it. He stopped in the shadows.

"But why, why?"

"Oh, Mark, don't be unreasonable."

"Don't say those things to me." His voice was lower and harder. "There must be somebody. What about this morning? Was that him?"

"Don't look like that, Mark." Her voice was sharp, her words quick. "Get your hand off that gun. I'm not going to tell you, and you're not the kind of man to try to force me to tell. Please leave."

There was a long silence. Then Mark said slowly, "No, I'm not the kind of man to try to force you. But I'm going to find out, Lily. You can't get away with this. Either of you. No, I won't force it from you. But I'm staying right here until he comes. You said you were leaving with him tonight. Very well, when he comes—"

"No!" she cried. "Mark, put down that gun!"

A shot roared through the hotel, and then another. Glass tinkled down in the lobby, and the silence come down again, seeming to hum.

Joe stepped into the light. "Mark, come on. Frenchy's alone downstairs."

Her face flew wide open with terror. Mark was sitting in a chair with his gun ready. "Joe!" she cried. "Joe, get out, get away, quick!"

He looked at her coldly. "What's the matter with you, Miss Furness?"

Mark stood up slowly and looked at her pale face. "How did you know him?"

Her hand was at her mouth and her face was greenish.

"Come on, Mark," Joe said smoothly.

"I'm not leaving here," Mark said quietly, "until the man shows up that—" His voice died.

"I thought you said you didn't know Lily," he said. "But she knew you."

"Now listen, Mark—"

"And you were in New Orleans too."

"Mark," Lily began.

"And that's why you warned me to lay off of her this morning," Mark went on. His eyes were coming back to life, and

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moved heavily to his brother's. "And you had my twenty thousand all along, and wouldn't give it to me. And you were planning to go away with her tonight, with my twenty thousand."

"That's a lie," Joe said.

"Is it?" Mark asked quietly.

"Mark, she's nothing to me. I took her just to show you, to warn you off."

She was looking at him now with grief and horror and shock.

"I wouldn't have her on the end of a stick. That's all, Mark."

"You liar. You lying son. You knew her in New Orleans." Mark's lips were pulled away from his teeth. "You double-crossing, stinking—" He looked suddenly at Lily. "As for you, you rotten little tramp, I hope you like him well enough to like him dead. I wish to God I'd never seen you. Take him." His face moved back to Joe, and he was smiling. "I'll meet you downstairs, brother. You come down those stairs and I'll be waiting for you."

Joe jerked up a hand to stop him. "Mark, I only did it to show you, Mark. Wait, Manion's men—"

"If I don't get you, I hope to hell they do," Mark said, and ran past him.

Joe stood stiffly, listening to his feet going down the hall. He looked at Lily.

"Is that true?" she said, her eyes moving over his face. "Is that true, what you said about us?"

"Us," he said heavily. "What chance is there for us? I made too many promises, Lily."

"Then it wasn't true?" she asked, her voice filling out and her eyes slowly brightening. "You just said that for him?"

"Leave it right there, Lily, leave it hanging on the hook, without any answers. Fifty years from now, when we've all forgotten, it'll fall off of its own weight. All I know is I've got to see him through this." He turned to the door.

He stopped at the head of the stairs, one hand on the rail, all but his boots concealed from below by the wall running across one side of the stair-well.

"Come on down, brother," Mark said from below.

In the big mirror at the turn of the stairs, Joe saw him, standing beside one of the palms, silhouetted against the plate glass windows. Beyond the windows he saw the blazing glare of the street, and standing in the street, three of Manion's men, advancing cautiously, their guns out, their faces obviously puzzled by the silence of the hotel. Another figure stepped into the frame of the plate glass window at the west end of the porch, and stood staring through. The figure drew a gun and beckoned to the men in the street.

"Mark," Joe said sharply. "Get down. There's Manion's men behind you."

Mark laughed. "That's the last damned lie you'll ever tell me, brother. You think I'm sucker enough to fall for that old one? Come down, brother."

"For God's sake, Mark, I only did it to show you. Mark, we've got to fight together. They're coming up on the porch. Put up your guns, Mark, at least till after this. I can't shoot from here."

"You whining hound. You think I'd believe you?"

The figures were quietly crossing the porch. One of them raised a rifle and aimed in through the window at Mark's back.

Joe drew and leaped down the stairs to the landing. Mark's first shot whipped behind him into the panelling. He fired at the rifleman outside, shooting past Mark, missed him, and Mark's gun blasted again. The bullet caught him in the flesh of his arm, flinging him back against the panels. His face twisted as he raised his gun again with his other arm and fired, dropping the rifleman.

"Mark," he cried, swinging his gun to another as Mark raised his pistol for a last shot, aiming dead on his chest. He fired again, far to the side of Mark.

MARK whirled around as shots smashed in through the glass. One of the pottery tubs split open and the tree toppled over in a shower of dirt. Mark hit the floor, firing. Frenchy's gun in the hall began to pound. Bullets ripped along the panelling and Joe squatted, his face white as the shock of Mark's bullet began to sap his guts.

Mark scuttled toward him, firing at the men smashing at the front door, seized his leg and yanked him off the landing.

The big man and his two friends were with Manion's men outside. Joe and Mark lay firing together.

"Joe, Joe," Mark said. "Forgive me. Joe, I'm sorry."

The door smashed in, and they poured lead into the opening. The men wilted back under the fire. One of them took a run at the window, trying to leap through a jagged hole, and Joe caught him in mid-air. He came down half way through and hung across the jagged edge, his blood running down the glass in a crimson sheet.

The rest of them turned and ran for the street. Then a shotgun roared outside. He saw one of the wild faces blow away in a red shower, saw the man's hands fly up.

He got to his feet. "Come on," he said between his teeth, and ran low toward the door, firing as Manion's two remaining men scattered out of sight. Manion was shouting in a fury of rage and grief, alone in the quiet street, somewhere off to the side. Joe leaned heavily against the inside of the doorjamb.

"Come out of there, damn you!" Manion shouted. Hoofs thundered in the dust, and three horsemen tore past the hotel, the big man leading his two friends.

"Get out of town, Manion!" Joe shouted. "I'm still the boss of this place."

"Come out of there and fight me!" Manion shouted back.

"All right," Joe answered. He cocked his gun, his face shining with sweat and fury, and stepped out of the door. Manion was standing on the boardwalk in front of the Palace, his heavy face red. As he saw Joe, he raised his gun and fired. The bullet cracked past Joe as he aimed carefully and squeezed off. Manion crumpled to the boards, clutching his leg. Joe let his gun fall to his side and watched him.

"You want to fight some more, Colonel," he asked, "or are you satisfied with that?" Manion sat groaning to himself, clutching his knee.

"There's one more," he said to Mark beside him. "Lavery."

"Don't bother," Alice said behind him. He turned. There was sweat on her face and steam on her hair and blue smoke wisping from the end of her shotgun. "He's going back where he came from."

Far down the street, a horseman turned up out of an alley, bent low and whaling the rump off Lily's graceful hunter. The black figure grew smaller, bouncing slightly on the green plush sidesaddle.

Joe leaned against the doorjamb again, but it wasn't enough, so he slipped down and sat on the porch. He was damn' tired.

"Joe, Joe," Mark said, close beside him. "I was a fool. Joe, I'm sorry."

Shafer's eyes were blank, and he began to laugh softly to himself. "That's wonderful. Take your girl Alice away from here. Frenchy's got your twenty thousand in a sack of flour." He looked up as the skirt of a green riding habit swirled in front of him, and saw her face, white and furrowed and covered with bitter tears. "Put this woman on the train tonight, Mark," he said. "That'll make you damned sure I wasn't lying to you. I wouldn't have her on the end of a stick."

He closed his eyes and started to lie down sideways, but not before Mark caught him.

IT WAS a small picture, about six inches by four, and showed her in a long, white lacy gown with a white parasol over her head, and she was smiling with her big, mischievous eyes. He sat in the dusk of the office while the lights in the street outside perked up.

The bandage around his arm was black with dried blood. His feet were on the desk. Outside, the town was roaring into life and the nightly shooting had begun.

A train whistle hooted dismally in the evening and he listened, his face growing softer. The whistle shrieked again, and then died slowly away.

Feet clumped up the steps outside, and he sat a little straighter. Mark came in.

"What you sitting in the dark for?"

"So nobody can shoot me. What about Alice?"

"The hell with Alice. The hell with all women."

"She saved your life. You were going to get married once. She's a good girl. You go away, Mark, and forget about Lily, and then come back to Alice."

"Come back hell. She quit Frenchy's place. She's going to St. Louis."

"You go to St. Louis too and cool off a while. You put Lily on the train?"

"Yeah. Joe—" His voice was almost shy. "Joe, I understand a lot of things now I didn't before." His voice was suddenly clear and level. "I mean, I know you were on the level about Lily. She's nothing to me. Whatever she is or was to you is your own business. The hell with women."

(Please turn to page 98)

STARVATION

The exiled, the hopeless, the beaten in that slowly-moving cavalcade of hell, all stared west, toward the fabeled 37th Parallel and the sanctury of the sweet, free green grass of California. But between lay the dreaded Sierra Nevadas, the silently falling, slow-killing snow—and the ghastly power of hunger that turned men into beasts before they lay down and died. . . .

A man could be smothered and swallowed by huge drifts

PARALLEL

Saga of a Cavalcade of the Damned

By

C. HALL THOMPSON

CHAPTER ONE

Parson of Hell's Camp Ground

THE last mule died after nightfall on the fifteenth day. It had to happen. The sullen plateau, unshielded by trees or mountain wall, was a place where all things died. Vicious blasts of gritty snow did not slacken. The wind rose steadily, gnawing at barren earth. Our camp was twelve thousand feet above sea level. It was only a matter of time. The store of fire-

wood dwindled. Macaroni and bacon were running low. Men died more slowly than animals or plants. But they died.

I crouched in my blanket, watching their emtpy faces. They huddled near the fire, worn, thin. There was no hope in their dull eyes. They had given up watching the lamplight under Captain Linett's tent-fly. They had quit believing the captain would dream up a miracle to see us through. Stokes no longer worked on those sketches of the wife he'd left in Kentucky. Maybe his artist's fingers were numbed by cold. Maybe the sketches only made it harder to understand he might never see her again. Ketcham had gone silent. He was a seasoned trapper, a man who had cheated the winter of the Sierra Nevada before. Now, even he had begun to worry.

In the fireglow John Gann's face was dark with anger. He didn't speak, but the hatred in his eyes never left the skinny figure hunched across from him. Cotter did not meet Gann's stare. Once Cotter shuddered; I think it was more fear than cold. I saw the tall, thin form of Huston uncoil and rise. He went and sat beside Cotter. He offered Cotter a drink. His voice was gentle, reassuring. I heard Gann snort and swear thickly. Nobody seemed to notice. The men only stared at the snow-powdered night beyond the fire with blank, hopeless eyes.

In the beginning there was hope. In November, at Bent's Fort, we were different men. We laughed and drank hard and the senoritas danced on the patios the night before our party jumped off. There was music and bright bandannas and because he had too much rotgut, Ketcham proposed to Maria, the pockmarked breed who kept Colonel Bent's house. Even Gann was in good humor. He eyed Huston's missionary clothes suspiciously but he tolerated Huston. He made a drinking friend of Cotter, who had been hired to guide us by Captain Linett. We were happy men. Worldbeaters. Men who would find a new life beyond the mouth of the del Norte, by crossing the divides near the 37th parallel. Cotter would show us the way. He swilled Taos Lightning and bragged about his twenty years' experience in the treacherous passes of the Sierra Nevada. And we believed him.

I was like all the rest. Liquor warmed my belly. Excitement fired my brain. I even laughed at Ketcham's drunken lovemaking. And, just a little, I began to wonder if Huston's Holy Joe talk really meant what it said. Maybe he was right. Across the parallel, in California, maybe I could find something to hang onto. Maybe things *would* be better. But those thoughts didn't last long.

The first storm came in December. The passes were clogged. A man could be swallowed and smothered by huge drifts. Three of our packmules were. That was the least of it. In the blinding confusion of the storm we found out about Cotter. He wasn't a guide with twenty years' experience. He was a bony, frightened little man who had only wanted the money Linett offered. Cotter had led us into one of the most dangerous passes of the Sierra Nevada. He was lost.

We couldn't push on. To the west, if the whirling snow let up for a moment, all you could see was snow-swamped bottomland. Even using mauls, we couldn't get through the clotted passes. Sickly mountain grass was blown clear of drift only at the crest of the plateau's naked ridges. The mules didn't last long. They clustered in lonely groups, braying against the wind. When the freeze reached their hearts, they fell on their sides like broken wooden toys and died. It wasn't nice to watch.

The men grew silent. No one but Huston spoke to Cotter. The guide's pale eyes sank deeper in their sockets. I doubt if he slept. He was too afraid of the men. He kept looking at Gann's stiff, massive face. Gann ate in silence and smoked his battered clay pipe, huge shoulders hunched against the wind. The others despised Cotter, but they did nothing. In Gann's eyes, you could see the hatred growing and waiting to break free.

IT made me sick. When I watched him, the fear, hurt and loneliness piled up inside me, and I knew it was the same with Gann and the rest. I knew the hope was no good, and things would never be better for me. I did not look at Huston. I wondered bitterly how he felt now about his big words and that great faith he said never let a man down.

The death of the last mule was the breaking point. It was a gentle beast called Nellie. We had made a pet of it. That

night, it chewed free of its thether and gnawed wildly at the dead ground. When it floundered into the darkness beyond the camp, no one stopped it. After a while we heard Nellie screaming. Her stiffened legs had sunk in a drift. The men did not move. The screeching got louder. Strokes buried his face in those thin, artistic hands. I heard Huston say, "Easy, kid," softly. Then, abruptly, John Gann was standing. His heavy mouth worked. He said, "For God's sake, why don't she die!" Nobody answered.

The mule wailed again. I saw Gann slide his hunting knife from its sheath. I saw Cotter stiffen. But Gann moved past him toward the dark that hid Nellie. It was funny. We couldn't see a thing. But when the mule screamed you felt the blade plunging through frozen hide and then the burn of the heartblood spilling out over your hand. You felt death in the stillness that followed. Stokes' shoulders worked. He was crying. The others sat still and waited.

Gann came back to the fire-circle in slow, deliberate strides. The knife was still in his hand. He hadn't cleaned the blood from it. His face was flushed and hard. This time he did not pass Cotter. He stood between the guide and the fire. His shadow hid Cotter and a sob caught in the little man's throat.

Gann said in a low voice, "It'd be better if we all went like that. Quick. A quick pain and no more waiting."

Cotter shivered. His mouth opened. No words came. Huston got up. He looked taller and thinner against firelight. His long face was calm. He walked to where Gann stood. Gann didn't look at him.

"Fighting each other won't help," Huston said quietly.

Gann kept staring at Cotter. "Stay out of this, Preacher. No more of your fancy talk. I got a bellyful." One huge fist snagged Cotter's jacketfront. Cotter whimpered. The words came through Gann's teeth. "He's no better than the mules; not as good. The mules didn't lead us into a death-trap . . ."

The knuckles of the knife-hand were dead white. I saw Huston's fingers clamp on the thick wrist. His face was close to Gann's. He didn't raise his voice. "You don't want to hurt Cotter."

Gann's neck was swollen with blood. "I told you, shut up, you damn' fool!"

Huston said, "Men ought to believe in something. They ought to hope. Linett's no tenderfoot. He's explored worse spots than this. He'll get us through."

Gann let go of Cotter and turned to face Huston. The laugh was raw in his throat.

"Sure. We'll get through. All we got to do is swallow your missionary slop, and a miracle will save us!"

I saw the muscles of Huston's jaw tense.

"You leave Cotter alone," he said flatly. "You'll make no more trouble."

"The hell you say!"

Gann twisted back to the guide's crumpled form. His fingers caught at the spindle of neck. He could have snapped the bone easily. He didn't get a chance. Huston got him by the shoulder and spun him around. The long, thin arm came back and shot out, hard. Gann's head jolted to one side. He said: "Dirty son!" and lost his hold on Cotter. The guide scrambled clear. I saw Gann's knife-hand go up; firelight winked on the blade. It came down. Huston stumbled back and fell. Somebody said, "God!" There was a ragged slit in Huston's sleeve and forearm. Gann lunged toward him. That was when I stepped in.

I caught Gann from the left side. My leg tangled his and I got a right under his guard. He grunted. He tried the knife on me. I jabbed a knee into his gut. He doubled. I held onto the knife-wrist, twisting. We fell. I felt weak and giddy. You get that way on strict rations. Gann had me pinned to the ground. The knife wasn't far from my throat.

A flat, commanding voice said, "Drop it, Gann!"

THE mountain of flesh above me tensed. Gann was very still. Captain Linnett stood only a few feet from us. The rifle rested easy in the crook of his arm, but his finger was on the trigger. The muzzle was leveled on Gann's chest. Gann let go the knife and got to his feet. His black eyes glared at Linett, but he didn't say anything. I stood up, breathing hard. Linett came and picked up the knife, sliding it back into Gann's sheath. His eyes were gray under sandy brows they didn't blink.

"Men can last quite a spell without grub," he told Gann. "If they don't waste strength on crazy fights."

Gann opened his mouth to speak. He didn't.

Linett said slowly, "No man hankers to die before his time. Does he?"

They stood still for a second, eyeing each other. It was Gann who broke. He shrugged as if it didn't matter, and muttered a curse. He pushed through the men to the fire and stood over it, filling the clay pipe. I saw his eyes when he lit the pipe. They still studied Cotter's crouched figure. The hate was not gone—only held at bay for the moment.

Captain Linett turned to Huston and pulled back his torn sleeve. The cut was long and deep. "Get it bandaged," he said. "Then come to my tent. I want to talk to you. I have a plan. . . ."

A mutter of surprise went through the man. Stokes' mouth fell open. Old Ketcham said, "A plan?" in a tight voice. Something stirred behind the blank masks. The eyes that watched Linett walk back to his tent seemed brighter. Men looked at one another.

Huston was looking at me as the blood still pulsed sluggishly from the arm wound.

I said, "There's wrappings in the pack." I got them and didn't look at Huston as I wound the bandages tight. I could feel his eyes on me.

After a minute he said quietly, "They don't understand, Gann and the rest. A man has to cling to something if he wants to get through." He rolled down the ripped sleeve. "You could've let Cann have me. But you stepped in. Maybe you're beginning to see. . . ."

The look I gave him stopped him short. My mouth felt stiff. I knew he could see the answer in my eyes. Nothing was changed. The bitterness and hurt were still inside me, and for me it was still the way it was for the others; highsounding words like faith and hope didn't mean a thing. I had stepped between him and Gann because I owed him that much. That was all. I looked at Huston. "You bought me a drink once," I said. "We'll call it even."

He didn't say any more. He only stared at me for a time, then turned and walked toward Linett's tent.

I eked out half-a-pipe of tobacco and lit it. I sat smoking and staring at the white heart of the fire and all the time, inside, something whispered to me, It's no different. It'll never be any better for you . . . no better than it was in the beginning."

CHAPTER TWO

The Beckoning Parallel

THE beginning was emptiness. It was the night I stood at the bar in Bent's Fort, trying to fill the hollowness in my chest with cheap rum. I had no right to the rum. I couldn't pay for it. Only nobody knew that. There was a party leaving in the morning under command of Captain Francis Linett. The Bent brothers handed free liquor to the members of that party. The barkeep didn't know I wasn't one of Linett's men. The laughter was loud. Nobody knew I wasn't part of it. Nobody but me.

I downed the free rotgut, feeling the difference between those men and me. They were men going somwhere I was a worn-out moocher at the end of a long raveling rope. A man with nowhere to go and no dinero to take me there. Maybe it was the empty look in my eyes that put the bartender wise. He spat tobacco juice on the floor and asked me was I tied up with Linett. I was drunk. I laughed. He asked me to pay. I laughed again; sick laughter that tasted rotten. His face got red; his hands got rough. They closed on my pants-seat. Everybody roared. It's real funny, seeing a barfly pitched out on his pratt.

Then a soft voice told the barkeep, "It's all right, Matt. Let him go . . ."

The man who spoke was tall, with a narrow, rugged face. His skin was stained with sun and traildust. I had seen him talking to Linett's men. His name was Huston. My eyes were blurred, but I could still see the black cloth and white clerical collar. Gray eyes smiled quietly under the brim of a black sombrero. Huston counted out coins on the bar. He looked at the bartender.

"That ought to cover his bill."

He didn't wait for an answer. The steady gaze swung back to me. I turned away. I said, "Thanks," thickly, and walked to a table in the dimmest corner of the low, smoky room. I sat down heavily, staring at the empty glass someone had left. I could hear the strike of boots crossing toward me. I waited. He stopped at the table. I didn't

look up. But I felt him standing there.

I said, "You paid for my drinks. That don't say I got to listen to a Holy Joe lecture."

Huston set a three-finger jigger of rum in front of me. "I thought you might need that."

I stared at the glass. I was shaking inside, sick with shame. I gulped the drink. Huston sat down and crossed lanky legs. His voice had a tone that soothed. "You're not going with Cap'n Linett?"

I didn't answer.

"Lots of men would grab a chance to see California," Huston went on. "We'll need men out there. We'll need to build a clean place for the woman and kids that come later. Lots of men—"

"Got the money to buy their way across the 37th Parallel," I finished flatly. "I ain't lots of men."

Huston leaned forward slightly. "But, you want to go."

I thought that one over. The loud *thrum* of bandoline and tomtom seemed far away. A plump Araphoe girl was dancing for the men. I wasn't seeing her. There were too many sour memories in the way.

I said, "Why should I? What can I expect? New country; man always goes to a new land expecting something. A better life, peace, happiness. Like my old man. He hit the Missouri frontier when it *was* frontier. What'd it get him? He watched my mother die of snakebite because there wasn't no doctor to be found. She swelled up. Her face got black. He used to drink himself blind, trying to forget it . . ." I stared at the table. "Why should I want to go?"

Huston's eyes were steady. "But you would if you had the money."

The grin felt stiff on my lips. "Smart, ain't you? A real bright boy. All right. I'd go. But only because there's nothing for me here. Nothing but a bullet when a certain gent from Independence catches up with me."

Huston raised one thick brow.

I laughed. "Yeah. A bullet. It ain't a nice story, Preacher. His name was Brock. He had dinero, a nice fat poke. He didn't know much about blackjack. I did. The deck was marked. I heard, afterwards, he swore he'd run me down."

"Men change their minds," Huston said. "They find out money ain't everything. You got to figure on the good side of human nature."

"Good side?" That laugh went bitter in my gullet. "I told you that missionary palaver was wasted on me. I'm a bad subject. That poke I stole from Brock, remember? I got as far as the next town with it. I met a girl. She seemed like something I'd been looking for for a long time. She turned out to be a two-bit honkytonker that got me stewed and rolled me. Faith in human nuature? Mighty pretty words. Put them to music, maybe I'll listen."

For a long while, Huston didn't speak. The laughter was getting sloppy. A Mexican girl was squealing because a trapper named Prester wouldn't let her go. There was a fight over monte boiling up at the far table. Noise and smoke pushed in on me. I felt sick. Huston's voice sounded far off.

"You got to hang onto something, kid. Everybody does. Maybe, for you, it's the 37th parallel. If you had faith in that, if you believed there was something for you on the other side . . ."

I said dully, "Will faith get me across, friend? Will believing buy my way into Linett's party?"

It got quiet. Even the drunken roaring of the men seemed muted. Huston's eyes met mine. It was crazy, but I couldn't look away.

"A lot of people will come to that new country," he said after a moment. "They'll need more spiritual foundations to build on. I thought of putting up a mission. I could use a sidekick that wasn't scared of work."

I blinked. It didn't seem like I'd heard right. Huston was smiling.

I said, "Why should you take me on—pay my way, buy my equipment? What do you get out of it?"

He just kept smiling. A nasty idea pushed into my foggy brain.

"Brock wants me," I told him. "But not bad enough to give you a reward . . ."

The grin went crooked; the lean jaw muscles knotted. His chair scraped as he stood up. He would have left.

I said, "Wait a minute." He paused. I looked at him hard. "A man gets kicked around, he's careful. He likes to be sure."

The easy smile came back. "Then it's a

deal. I'm right certain we can get along."

I answered the smile. This time I meant it. "Only one condition, friend. Don't expect a convert for the favor."

Huston sat down. He got out makings and rolled one carefully.

"Like I said, men change. But they do it slow. They got to learn for themselves. Out there, there's hope. A new life in a new world. For all of us. Maybe you'll drink to that? To the 37th parallel?"

"In black coffee," I told him. "A man ought to start a new life sober!"

We laughed. . . .

I COULD still hear it—that laughter echoing in my head. Only now it had gone bitter, and wasn't laughter at all—it was nightwind that screamed in the snow-blinded passes of the Sierra Nevada. I shivered. I snapped a brittle twig and threw it into the fire. To think I had begun to believe that line of highflown words! I had begun to hope—and this was the end hope brought you to. Frozen carcasses of mules half-buried in the snow. Men who stared at death with empty eyes and tried not to sleep for fear they'd never wake again. It was a laugh. My God, it was funny. But I felt like crying.

Around me the camp stirred uneasily. Men spoke in hushed voices. I saw John Gann's heavy, bitter face turn toward Linett's tent. I looked. Huston and Linett came slowly toward the fire. The wind had died. The men waited. It was so quiet you could hear drifting snowflakes sputtering on the burning logs. Linett stood at the center of the circle of men. He wasn't smiling.

He said tonelessly, "I talked it over with the parson. We figure to use my plan."

The anxious mutter rose and fell; eyes did not leave the captain.

Gann's words were a thick rumble. "What plan?"

Linett didn't look at Gann. He spoke to the men. "You all know the Red River settlement that lies about twenty-five miles north of Taos. A small party with light gear could reach it. The rest would camp here till a rescue crew came for them."

For a while, nobody said a word. Gann came closer to the fire. "Who goes with the party to Red River?"

Linett named four men. Gann wasn't one of them. The full mouth tightened. Big teeth clamped on the pipestem.

"So I stay here?"

"You and nine others," Linett said quietly. "The strongest—the men who can last longest—camp here wth most of the provisions . . ."

Huston put a hand on Gann's arm. "There's no call to worry. The cap'n'll be back—"

Gann swung angry eyes on Huston. "That's all right, Preacher. You can talk. Linett wouldn't dare leave a man of the cloth behind!"

A puff of smoke whirled over the fire; the damp wood snapped. Huston did not answer. Levelly, the captain said, "The parson's one of the ten that stay."

Gann's mouth opened slightly, then shut hard. You could see him looking for the right words. He didn't find them. Finally he turned sharply on his heel and walked to the fire. He stood with his back to Huston, pretending to warm his hands.

After a moment Linett said, "We best start readying. "The snow's thinning. It may stop by sun-up. That's when we hit trail."

The storm didn't let up. It got worse. Daylight was only a cold glare through the driving snow. Linett's party left anyway. Before they were a hundred yards down-trail we lost sight of them. Dead silence closed in. Men chewed meager, half-frozen rations without tasting them. No one talked. Stokes sat staring at a blurred drawing of his wife. Cotter hid his face in his hands. I think he cried. Once, Huston touched his sleeve.

"Don't listen to Gann, kid. A man's got to believe. Linett"ll get through."

I only looked at him. I wanted to laugh in his face. I turned and walked away.

CHAPTER THREE

Waiting Kills Quick

WAITING is a disease. It eats at the nerves; your hands shake; you fight at the drop of a hat. Your eyes burn with trying to see something you know isn't there. You start by counting minutes. In the end you lose track of days. At first Ketcham kept the fire at a bright blaze; he didn't want the relief party to miss us.

Shortly he gave it up. The fire dwindled. Men shivered in stiff, crusted blankets. In the middle of the third night, Huston woke me. Cotter had wandered off. Nobody seemed to care. Gann stared at the half-empty food cache. You could see him thinking it was good riddance. There would be more for the rest of us. Huston didn't see it that way. We found Cotter, head and shoulders buried in a drift near the chasm that sliced through the pass. Huston knelt and prayed. I didn't stay to listen.

It got colder. At high noon, the thermometer stood at zero. The nights were worse. Stokes had gone out of his head and talked endlessly about his wife. The freeze crept into his dysentery-drained body. After a time he slept. He didn't wake. It was like that with the others. Some cried. A blond boy named Durkin kept singsonging a nursery rhyme, and in the end, suddenly, he let out a scream and ran to the lip of the chasm. No one could move fast enough to stop him. We heard him still screaming as he fell. The chasm must have been a thousand feet deep. That night Huston prayed again. Watching him, I felt the bitter laughter boiling up inside me. He prayed a lot after that. In all, six of the men died.

We sat staring at the snow mounded over their bodies. Sometimes Huston read by firelight. The book was a little one with goldleaf lettering on the black cover. Once, looking at it, Gann laughed sourly. Huston went on reading. Leaning in the lee of a rock, old Ketcham chewed a cold pipestem. Tobacco was long since gone, but I think biting the stem made the numbness of his frozen right foot less noticeble. Weakness made even speech an effort. None of us moved. None except Gann. He paced like a fretting mountain cat; his huge body had more resistance than ours. His eyes had gone wary; they never left the pack where the food was stored. On the eight day after Linett departed, we ate the last of it.

Crouched over the tin plates, we drained the last drops of bacon fat. Gann ran a finger along his thick mustache, then licked the finger. He looked at the empty messkit. His mouth quivered. There were thoughts behind the bloodshot eyes and they weren't pretty. The three of us watched him. Abruptly, the dam of silence splintered. He said, "Damn it to hell!" and threw the tin dish into darkness. It clashed against a stone; the sound echoed and died. Stillness closed in again.

Gann's voice was raw. "What do we do now?"

Ketcham didn't look at him. Neither did I. It only made thing worse, seeing your own fears warp someone else's face. Huston stared straight at Gann. Finally he said, "We wait."

"Wait!" Gann snapped. "For what? To die like the others? Wise up, Preacher! Your fine words ain't working! Linett won't be back! Ten to one he never got through!"

Huston's voice had lost depth and force but somehow the words were still strong.

"The cap'n got through."

"How in hell do you know?" Gann jerked his head crazily toward the black sky. "You got a special message from up there?"

There was no answer. Huston's grip tightened on the little black book. My own voice sounded thin and distant. "Even if he does get through, that don't say he'll find us."

Gann's lip curled down. "Or even try," he said. "Why should they risk their necks for us? Once they're safe, you think they'd take another chance? We wait here, we freeze. I say move. Hit out for Red River while we can still walk."

"Ketcham can't walk," Huston said flatly.

WIND-REDDENED eyes switched to the old trapper. Ketcham met them without blinking. There were ideas behind Gann's blank face. He had lived with Indians. He had seen them desert the ones too old or weak to travel—give them a pittance of food and firewood and leave them behind to die.

Huston stared at the spluttering fire. "A man needs faith in something, Gann. If we don't stay put—"

"Faith don't fill your empty belly, Preacher!"

"If we don't stay put, Linett'll never find us!"

"Linett be damned!"

"Huston's right, mister . . ." The words were thin and hoarse. Ketcham's eyes looked feverish in the wasted face. "Keep moving and the cap'n'll pass you by . . ."

One bony hand reached out and drew an old Winchester to rest across Ketcham's knees. He eyed Gann steadly. "I reckon the parson's right about a heap of things. I know. You live a life on the prairie, you do a lot of thinking. Out there, alone, you know you got to trust in somebody or something. Otherwise, living ain't worth the trouble . . ."

"Words!" Gann snapped. "Can you eat them? Do they keep you warm?"

Nobody answered. The big frame turned to me. "You. You got some horse-sense. What do you say? Move or stay?"

I didn't look at them. My throat felt dry. Finally: "Ain't much sense in wandering off, if Captain Linett's headed for here."

"Linett!" Gann roared. "Linett this, Linett that! What in hell is he—God Almighty?"

"Shut up." Ketcham's voice had an edge; his finger brushed the Winchester's trigger.

For a long time Gann only stared. The barrel-chest heaved. Then, slowly he swung to Huston. "All right, Holy Joe. You got us. Now, maybe you can answer a question with your faith. What do we use for grub while we wait?" A broken laugh caught in his throat. "Do we make a compact, maybe? Sure. That's it. The ones that live eat the ones that die!"

It got too quiet. Hunger does rotten things to a man's mind. The words had been meant as a bitter joke, but the minute they were out, Gann's face stiffened. Ketcham's hand went rigid on the Winchester. The emptiness inside me growled like a chained animal. I tried not to think about the words. It didn't work. Nobody talked and in the stillness the sick thoughts kept swinging through the dark from man to man. The echo of the words wouldn't die.

That night Ketcham didn't lie down or let go the gun. Gann's eyes flicked warily from one of us to the next. I saw him slip the skinning knife under his saddlepillow before he slept. Huston looked worried. I wanted to shut it all out. I told myself it was wrong and crazy and, by sunup, the words would be forgotten. But they wouldn't. I tried to sleep. It was no good. All I could think of was food. I knew it was the same with the others.

CHAPTER FOUR

Man-Eater

FIVE days like that. Five nights that never seemed to end, and in the nights, the four of us, waiting, listening for a sound that came too near. The way Gann watched us made me sick. But I knew the same wary look stiffened my own face. I dreamed a great deal, wild dreams of strange foods that clung warm and fatty to the teeth. I woke sweating. Nothing had changed. Hungry eyes still stared. Motionless bodies still waited. The break came on the sixth night. Ketcham sank into spells of delirium. He was hard to control. Gann and I held him; Huston looked at the frozen leg. It was dead. The freeze had spread almost to the knee. It was Ketcham, in one of his lucid periods, who decided to amputate.

He had seen it done before. He gave the orders in a flat voice. You would have thought he was talking about the weather. Gann's knife was whetted to razor-edge. The saw in the kit was rusty but the teeth were fine. The Winchester barrel turned blood red in the fire's heart. We were ready. Ketcham's eyes had glazed again. He muttered about some forgotten Indian attack. There was no liquor to dull the pain. Gann and I could barely hold him. Huston used the knife.

The tourniquet didn't help much. There was a mess of dark blood that turned pink, melting into the snow. The rasp of metal on bone made me dizzy. Ketcham screamed and wrenched his pinned arms. The steaming gunbarrel seared the ragged stump, taking up arteries swiftly. Ketcham passed out. There were red cuts in his lip where his teeth had sunk in. Huston swabbed the wound with gun-oil and bandaged it.

Ketcham did not move. He scarcely breathed. He was like that throughout the night. I think Huston prayed. I wasn't watching him. I stared at Gann. His eyes had a brightness I didn't like. He studied Ketcham's wasted face too closely. That look of a waiting animal had hardened his mouth again.

Ketcham did not regain consciousness. He lingered through the next day. He went with the sun. Night closed in and he just stopped breathing. Gann came closer, staring dully at the crumpled form. Huston

looked from him to me and back again. His long angular body waited. I saw it go rigid when a raw laugh burst through Gann's lips.

Unsteadily, Gann swung to face Huston.

"All right, Preacher! There's your faith! Did Ketcham a lot of good, didn't it?" The laugh came again. "But you know something? Food might've done him more good. . ." The grin went wry. "Yeah. He might've pulled through with grub in his belly. A man's crazy to think he can live without eating."

The wide face had gone dark in the firelight. Gann didn't look at Huston. The sunken eyes glared at Ketcham's body, and all the rotten sick thoughts were in them, not hidden now, but in the open, like pus spurting from a broken abscess. Gann stumbled a step toward the body.

Huston swayed on his feet. He said softly, "In the name of God, man. . ."

Gann wasn't listening. Massive shoulders bent over Ketcham. He had unsheathed the skinning knife.

Huston's hand caught the thick arm. For a moment I saw Gann's face. The teeth were bared. Blood gorged the puffy skin. He drew back one sledgehammer fist and let go. It caught Huston on the temple. He spun back and flattened on the ground near me. He tried to get up. He fell again. I could feel his eyes on me.

Maybe I wasn't too weak. Maybe I could have stopped Gann. I didn't try. Those crazy pictures of grub were burning in my head again. It was like being doped with liquor and laudanum. I watched Gann heft the dead weight of Ketcham to his shoulders. I saw him stagger under it, rounding the edge of a huge drift. Huston's mouth was moving. Maybe he asked me to do something. I don't know. I didn't know anything but the gripping hollowness of my belly. Minutes passed. Gann came back. He took firewood under one arm. He glared at Huston, his mouth wet-looking. He disappeared again beyond the drift. Very slowly I got to my feet.

Huston's hand clamped on my sleeve. He would have fallen if his back had not been against the mountain wall. His knees sagged. But he didn't let go of me. He said in a toneless voice, "You can't do it. . ."

I didn't answer. I tore free of his grip.

His eyes went cold. "All right," he said. "Maybe I should've known. You're just like Gann. Too weak. You run away from faith because you're afraid to be strong enough to believe. Because you're yel—"

The word slurred. My fist caught him in the teeth. His head slammed back against the wall. He stood quite still. A drop of blood oozed from one corner of his tight lips. I had to turn away from the hurt, beaten look behind his eyes.

He didn't try to stop me again. I lunged through the crusted snow. A heavy, burnt smell stung my nostrils. Crazy pictures danced before my eyes. Then, suddenly, I was on the other side of the drift. Gann had built a fire. He crouched before it, his back to me. I didn't look at Ketcham's body. I stood swaying, staring at the squat, animal shape of Gann. I couldn't see his face. I didn't want to. The wet, ugly sound of his chewing was enough. I stopped dead.

Rotten memories of food withered in my head. It couldn't be, I thought dully. This had to be wrong. What hunched by the fire wasn't a man. Somehow, in spite of everything, the big words had to mean what they said. Huston had to be right. I twisted away from Gann and retched. I don't know how I got back to the camp. I slumped weakly on my sleeping bag.

HUSTON'S hand touched my shoulder. I drew away. The bitterness had already swelled back on me. All right. He won again. Just as he won that night in Bent's Fort. But what had the promise of his 37th parallel got me? What could this get me but a grave? I could hear Huston reading aloud from the little black book. I tried to listen. It didn't help. That night, for the first time since I was a kid, I cried.

Someone was shaking me awake. I felt heavy with sleep and cold. A blurred face hung over me. Huston's voice was a whisper under the wind. "We got to move. He'll be back."

I must have looked confused.

"Gann. He was here and took the gun. It won't be like it was with Ketcham. He won't wait for us to die. We got to move while we're strong enough. . . ."

It was crazy. I felt a wild laugh clog in my chest. I swallowed hard.

Huston was urgent. "Remember that ledge to the west?"

I remembered. A narrow, shale-slippery

path that bridged the chasm. On the other side was a small plateau, walled in on three sides by naked mountain. I shook my head. "The path would cave under our weight."

I had a picture of earth and snow crumbling under us. I heard the way Durkin screamed when he plunged into the chasm.

Huston said flatly, "It's a chance we got to take. One at a time, it might hold us. On the other side, we're safe. That ledge would never take Gann's weight."

There wasn't much choice. The memory of Ketcham was even worse than that of Durkin.

It didn't seem real. The wind was too shrill, whipping through the divide. The natural bridge swayed like a mirage before my eyes. Sick fear knotted my belly. Snow lashed my face. I could hardly see. Huston went first. His feet left solid ground. He inched out onto the ragged ledge, carrying what was left of the firewood. Drift-ice slithered over the side and crashed into the dark pit of the ravine. Once, he slipped. A scream came up in my throat and died. Then he had made it, and I saw him dimly on the far side, waving me on. Wind and blood rushed in my ears. If only the ground would stop melting and billowing under me.

I heard Huston yell, "Easy, kid! Take it slow!"

A boulder dislodged at the far end of the ledge, slagging away into bottomless dark. I slipped; the path seemed to sag under me. I crawled the rest of the way on hands and knees. My palms were bleeding. I didn't notice. I slumped gratefully against the rock wall on the other side. I was too weak to move. If Huston hadn't had strength enough to build a fire then, we would have frozen to death. . . .

Maybe it was days. Maybe it was only hours. Time no longer had a meaning. It was still a business of waiting; feeling the cold creep under your hide, numb your brain, and waiting. But not for Linett. For Gann. Soon the waiting would end and we would see the huge bulk of him dark against the sky on the other edge of the chasm. The laughter was in my head again. I looked from Huston, quietly reading his little black book, to the last sticks of wood. I saw the fire smoulder and die and all the time that laughter roared bitterly. Then, toward dawn, it broke to abrupt silence. That was when Gann came.

HE LOOKED bigger than I remembered. His thick lips were twisted in a grin. He stood on the far lip of the shale bridge, staring at us. The Henry was cradled in his arm. Huston stood with his back to the wall. His face was still calm. So was his voice. "The ledge won't hold you, Gann."

Gann didn't answer. The sour smile stayed in place. He watched us. I had seen that look before—when he stared at Ketcham's body. He stepped out onto the bridge.

"Wait, Gann. Don't move."

Gann stopped.

Huston took a step forward. "Behind you, man! Look! Coming up the valley. It's Linett. It's the relief!"

"Tricks, Preacher?" Gann said thickly. He took another step. Shale slid from the ledge's lip.

Huston spoke quietly. "It's not a trick. You heard that rumble. It was their guns—signaling to us. All you got to do is turn—look. . . ."

Gann didn't stop. I heard slag dribbling into the ravine with each heavy stride. The gunstock was nestled against his shoulder.

Huston said, "I told you, Gann. You got to hold onto something. Without belief, you're nothing!"

Gann shook his head. "No more words, Preacher. Too late for words. . ."

He lowered his head and deliberately drew bead on Huston. I could almost feel the pressure of his finger on the trigger. Huston yelled, "Don't Gann!" and slid to one side. There was only the roar of the rifle. Concussion did it. I saw rock split in a jagged line at the bridge base. There was a small avalanch of snow and wild wind and Gann's insane scream. It took a long while for the echo to die. Snowdust cleared. A bitter stink of burnt powder hung in the stillness. Where Gann and the bridge had been, there were only wind and whirling snowflakes. Slowly, Huston pulled himself to a sitting position. The wound in his arm was only skin deep.

The smile crooked on my lips. "So, it worked," I said hoarsely. "So, now, we live—for a few more hours. . ."

Huston's eyes were too steady. I looked

away. I just couldn't look at the man.

"Maybe your trick wasn't as smart as you think, friend. Maybe dying quick would've been better."

I waited for an answer. It didn't come. I felt movement beside me. Huston was standing. He reached down and caught me under the arms. It took a lot of doing, but he got me upright. I looked at him. He wasn't seeing me. I followed his gaze to the east. Falling snow threw a pale screen over everything. Even so, you could see them quite clearly. The sound of Gann's shot had reached them. The rescue party was coming our way.

The rest is not too clear. I remember men's faces and laughter that was real and raucous. I remember Captain Linett's handshake and the smell of stew broiling over the fire. And through it all, Huston's quiet, easy smile and the words that came and went, sure and warm in my head. A man's got to believe in something; in tomorrow; in the hope on the other side of the divide. He's got to believe beyond the 37th parallel. He's got to believe in himself. It had been a long time since I felt like praying.

It was a good feeling.

THE END

(Continued from page 6)

about Molly's cooking, his clean clothes and his firmly sewed buttons and Sam's peaceful, thriving ranch.

"What a shame," he thought, "if something went wrong and those two have to swing along with us!" And, impulsively, he turned his horse and galloped back to the wagon. There he found his three "brothers" in much the same frame of mind.

Molly was triumphant. "I knew you wouldn't do it!" she beamed. "You couldn't! After all, you've got a mother and father to think of!" And with that, the whole raiding party turned around and went back to the ranch, there to eat prune pie.

Hank, George and Pete married and, eventually, inherited the ranch. Jim went East to school, became a physician, and married. All kept the name of their devoted foster parents. The unorthodox adoption is still on file in the state of New Mexico, where all who doubt may read.

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(Continued from page 27)

your heels. Sundays they go to church when the padre gits there on his mule. Muy simpatica. None of that night-ridin' fence cuttin' shootin'. That's why I moved my family there. And I doubt if I kin git the missus an' her three kids back to Texas. So it looks like mebbyso I'll close out the Texas Muleshoe an' buy the other outfit I bin dickerin' for fu'ther up the Pecos. Together me'n you kin run the two spreads. I kinda owe it to the missus an' kids. After all the worry my good wife's had in Texas."

It was the first time Morningstar had mentioned having a wife and family and he grinned when he saw the sort of dazed look in Till's eyes.

"While all that killin' was goin' on, Till, I had to put my missus and her kids outa my mind. While I had gun work to do. These range wars is shore hell on wimmin' and their young 'uns. There'll be none of that in New Mexico. Morningstar grinned slowly. "I'm mighty glad that slaughter made you sick enough to puke, Till. It's a good cowman, not a gun-slinger I want for a ramrod. Mebbyso, some day, for a son-in-law. . . ."

"Huh?"

"I got a daughter, Till. Molly's sixteen now. Red-headed like her mother, black-eyed like me. She kin cook an' keep house, if you set her afoot. But if there's a horse to ride she's a-horseback. And she taught her kid brothers to ride before they could walk. When a slim kid rides out to meet your trail herd to ride the point with you on to the ranch, that'll be Molly. And I got a notion the two of you will kinda hit it off for pardners. I shore hope so, son."

Till said he hoped so, too. He didn't know why, but he felt his face redden. Morningstar was grinning at him with no hardness left in his black eyes.

Thus Morningstar proved himself something of a prophet. Because a couple of weeks later, when Till Scanlan pointed the trail herd from Fort Summer up the Pecos, he kept watching the country ahead. Watching. Waiting for Molly Morningstar to top the skyline. And when she did, young Till knew that she was the girl he would marry some day if she would have him.

THE END

(Continued from page 61)

go down, with his Colt still trailing smoke He was staring rigidly at Jim Callahan, hate pouring from his eyes. Callahan had to swing his weapon away from the Deacon's sagging figure. Kelso's slug raked his ribs and spun him partly around. That spin lined his gun. He heard the roar of it. Then he and Kelso were both on the ground.

But Callahan pushed up to a sitting position. Morg Kelso never moved.

"That was yo' present, Morg," Callahan said.

Then Tip was on one side of him, Viv Blanchett on the other. Callahan said, "There's yo' money, Tip, in that sack. I hope you use it right."

He got up and a pain seared his ribs. The girl was watching him. He said, "It wasn't for you, or Tip. A man just has to live with himself, and now maybe I can."

He started toward his horse and found the girl beside him. "Callahan — Jim! Where are you going, Jim?"

"Just going to ride."

"No, Jim, stay here," a man's deep voice said. "We need men like you. We were ready to help you, when we saw you fixin' to stand up to Kelso. You never gave us much time. We've all been scared of him, I guess. But—now we want you to stay on, as sheriff, Jim."

Will Todd, the blacksmith stood there, a shotgun cradled in his arm, his sooty face pleading. A number of men stood behind Todd, nodding agreement.

"It's been a long time," Callahan said. "A long, long time since any friend called me Jim. It makes me feel right good."

He was watching the girl with a queer eagerness in his eyes. He said, "How do you feel, Viv? Can a man live down his mistakes? Can a fellow like me ever hope for . . . happiness?"

"Les Blanchett was my half-brother," she said steadily. "He wronged you, Jim. He almost ruined you. But in you there's something that's like steel—that's fine. I've got faith in you. You've gone a long way today. I think that how far else you go is—up to you."

Callahan looked at her. For the first time in years he was really smiling.

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(Continued from page 83)

"Except Alice. You'll sweeten up after a while."

"Maybe. Maybe in a long while."

"That's fine. So long, Mark."

The dark figure went out of the door, closing it softly and humbly. A white apron shone in the flashing lights for a moment, and Frenchy came in.

"Where's the coffee?"

"It is coming. I am a new man since I killed that one who kicked me. Joe, maybe I better turn on the light. I got to talk with you." He struck a match.

"Frenchy," Joe said, gesturing toward the portrait, "take that damned picture with you when you go."

"Yeah, Joe, but first I got to talk to you. Joe, I took a liberty."

She came in the door sideways, lugging the heavy pot, sweat dripping down her forehead and running off the end of her nose. She did not look up as she came in and set down the cups. Her mouth was grimly compressed and her hair, wet with sweat and steam, clung to her forehead. Joe looked at her in silence.

"I thought I told Mark to put her on the train."

"Sure, Joe. He did. But Alice, she quits me. I got no waitress. So I take her off the other end of the car. I think I go."

"Wait a minute. Does Mark know?"

"Why not? I told him."

"Do you know what you are?"

"Sure, sure, I know." The Frenchman backed out the door.

She looked at him defiantly. "You can't send me away. I got this job on my own. It's a free country, and if I want to work for six dollars a week nobody—"

He got up and went past her to the picture on the wall and took it down. He walked to the door, opened it, and threw the picture into the street.

"What did you do that for?" she asked.

"Something's finished, and I'm free."

"You're not going to drive me away for the things I did?"

He walked toward her, his face brutal. She backed away a step. "Oh, please, not now, I must get back, it's business hours."

His good arm closed on her and he smiled a little. "Frenchy won't mind," he said.

THE END

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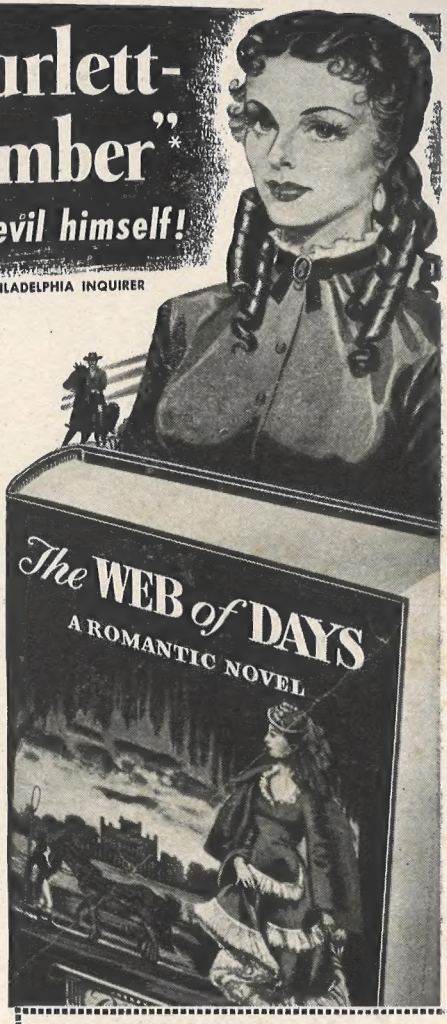

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